INTERKNIGHT PRESS PUBLICATIONS PRESENTS:

FOREVER NET BEFORE CHRISTMAS

a special holiday issue of

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INTERKNIGHT PRESS PUBLICATIONS
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FOREVER NET

SPECIAL ISSUE:

"FOREVER NET BEFORE CHRISTMAS"

CONTENTS:

Editor's Introduction: The Challenge
by Valery King iii

Challenge Story #1: Janette
Neither Flesh, Nor Fowl, Nor Good Red Herring
by Susan M. Garrett 1

Challenge Answer #1: Janette
A Vampire in My Stocking, *a Forever Knight script*
by Jennise Hall & Margaret Newman 17

Challenge Story #2: LaCroix
Angel Crossing
by Susan M. Garrett 31

Challenge Story #3: Nick
Coin of the Realm
by Susan M. Garrett 49

Challenge Answer #3: Nick
Flowers in the Night
by Sharon S. Scott 81

Challenge Story #4: Natalie
Trick of Treat
by Susan M. Garrett 85

Challenge Answer #4: Natalie
I'll Be Home for Christmas: *a Forever Nat story*
by Marian Gibbons 97

Challenge Story #5: Schanke
'Tis the Seasoning
by Susan M. Garrett 123

Christmas Bonus #1:
It's A Wonderful Knight
by Mary J. Farrell 129

Christmas Bonus #2:
O Mighty Town of Toronto
by Edith Crowe 137

About the Writers 139

The Challenge

by Valery King

'Twas the Knight before Christmas...

Hello, everybody, and welcome to our first-ever special issue of **Forever Net.** Those of you who have been with us in our previous two issues are familiar with the premise: **Forever Net** is an "electronic zine on paper." Two years ago, Jean Prior (known affectionately as Jaye) formed a mailing list on the Internet for *Forever Knight* fans, FORKNI-L. For a moribund late-late night show, there were quite a few fans eager to talk with each other about their (somewhat strange) passion and the list was an immediate success. Due in a large part to the listmembers, who spearheaded a write-in campaign to the corporate entities responsible for the program, our chief obsession is now thriving, with new episodes in syndication.

When fan-written fiction started appearing spontaneously on the chat list, Jaye took a poll and found that there was definitely enough interest to form a separate list devoted to fanfic, and FKFIC-L was born. From the beginning the quality of the fiction was phenomenal. The only drawback IMHO ("in my humble/honest opinion" in Netspeak) was that there were fans out there without Internet access who I felt would love to read the stories, too, and perhaps it would be a useful service to get the best of the fiction out to these electronically deprived people. So with a lot of help from one of our finer 'Net writers, Karin Welss, and with permission from Jaye and the FKFIC authors, **Forever Net** came into existence.

But what, you may wonder, is a fiction list/zine devoted to a tv series about a vampire cop doing putting out a *Christmas* issue?

I can tell you in two words:

Susan Garrett.

Yes, the phenomenally talented and incredibly prolific fan writer Susan M. Garrett discovered *Forever Knight*, and then started to write FK fiction, and to post it to FKFIC-L, and showed the rest of us what talent really was. A new story on the 'Net from Susan is truly an event to look forward to, and her many fans on the list are very lucky that she puts out so much quality work at an almost lightening pace. As a somewhat mediocre writer who works at a snail's pace, I sit in awe of this woman's talent. [Okay, Susan, you can come out of the bathroom now; the embarrassing gushing part is over.]

Before she left for her holiday in Florida last December, Susan issued a challenge to the list: she would write five stories, each featuring a different FK character in a Christmas-themed tale, if other writers would answer by posting their own Christmas FK fiction. She didn't ask each one to write five (good thing, too!) but each

time she posted a story she would wait until a challenge answer appeared before posting her next one. Somebody would have to come up with a story before she would post the next one. And the list writers came through with some very delightful, poignant, funny, and touching work, some of which you hold here in your hands.

This is not everything that appeared by any means. Tara O'Shea nabbed two of the stories before I even planned this issue for her own *Forever Knight/Highlander* zine, **Forever**. Other stories, poems and songs appeared on the list that were not direct challenge answers and are not included here. But what we have is, I hope, a balanced representation of the list holiday madness of 1993.

You will notice a few gaps, though. We didn't get any real LaCroix Christmas stories but Susan's wonderful "Angel Crossing," so there is not a Challenge Answer #3. And the Challenge Answer for a Natalie story is not a Christmas, but a Chanukah story--which is, after all, fitting: Christians are not the only group to celebrate the season!

So curl up by the fire, a cup of your favorite hot beverage close at hand, and prepare to enjoy the holidays *Forever Knight*-style. A better way to spend a chilly night is hard to imagine.

Enjoy!

Valery King, editor

October 11, 1994

Neither Flesh, Nor Fowl, Nor Good Red Herring

by Susan M. Garrett

Their eyes met for a brief moment--his green and flecked with gold, hers dark and older than time. Their gazes locked. They hissed at one another, baring fangs, protecting their territory and letting the other know just what was what.

Sidney went back to grooming his front paws. Shaking her head, Janette looked to the invoices on her desk, again regretting her decision to do a 'good deed' for Nicola.

It had been little more than an hour past sunset when she'd heard his step outside her office door, even over the thrum of the bass from Alma's choice of early evening party music. Dropping the files to the top of the cabinet, Janette had run to the door and thrown it open.

She'd known instantly that there was something wrong. Nicola's smile was nervous, hesitant. "*Joyeux Noel*, Nicola," she'd said, taking a step back into the office. "I do hope you're here to give me my present."

A blank look crossed his face, but he'd recovered quickly. Still standing in the doorway, he'd shrugged. "I'm on duty, but I'll be by when the shift quits. Janette . . . I need a favor."

She'd folded her arms, her smile disappearing. "What kind of 'favor'?"

"Well, Nat went home for Christmas--"

Janette had walked around her desk, trailing her finger along the edge of the wood. "Ah, and you have no one to accompany you to a party? While the cat's away, eh, Nicola?"

Her expectant look had brought an immediate denial. "No, nothing like that," he said quickly, glancing down at the floor beside him. "Actually, the cat's still here . . . "

She'd followed his glance and caught sight of the edge of a pet carrying case, the peeked just beyond the door. "You don't mean you're taking care of that . . . animal?"

"Yeah." He'd shrugged, then straightened, as if accepting the responsibility. "Like I said, I'm on duty tonight."

"So all the little mortals can scurry home to their Christmas celebrations?" Feigning a yawn, she'd seated herself on the edge of her desk. "How wonderfully unselfish of you."

"And I was wondering if you'd keep an eye on Sidney while I'm at work."

She remembered sitting bolt upright, horrified at even the suggestion of becoming a feline baby-sitter for the evening. "Nicola! Are you insane? Why can't you leave it in your apartment?"

Nicola glanced down at the cage again. "He's been acting . . . different. It could be that he misses Nat. Or he could be sick."

"So take it to a doctor."

"*If* I could find one open this late on Christmas Eve. And I'm late for work as it is." Picking up the box and holding it in both arms, he'd walked into the office, a little-boy-lost look on his face. "Please, Janette? Only until morning?"

He knew she could refuse him nothing when he looked at her like that. "All right," she relented. "Put it over there."

Nicola hadn't even followed the finger she used to point to the corner of the room. "You'll have to let him run around. I have his blanket, his food and water, some of his toys--"

"Its . . . toys? I won't have to *play* with it, will I?" Leaving the desk, she'd walked over to him. Carefully, she touched one of the bars in the box opening. A loud hiss caused her to withdraw her finger quickly. "Wouldn't it be happier *in* the box?"

"Come on, Janette, there's no room in there. I hated to put him in, but I had to get him over here--"

"Oh yes," she'd said, with exaggerated understanding, "your *precious* car."

Nicola had frowned, then put the cat carrier on the floor, in the center of the room. "Besides, if he's sick, he'll feel better if he can stretch out, roam around a bit."

She'd stared down at the box at her feet, still not daring to touch it, as he ran to the door and returned with a cardboard box. "And what about our friends outside? Letting it roam around the club--?"

Nicola had bent down and removed items from the box; a dish of food--that had the cat's name on it, no less--another of water, a litter box with fresh litter, a small rag from a blanket, and a few assorted rubber toys, one of which actually squeaked as he dropped it on the floor. He'd looked up quickly at her comment. "Just keep him in here, then."

Abandoning the box, he'd risen to his feet, placing his hands on her bare shoulders. "Janette, I really appreciate this. I didn't know where to take him. Schanke's off duty, Grace is working, and then I remembered you'd owned a cat once."

She'd sniffed audibly, looking away from him. "Nicola, you know as little about those animals as you do about women. One does not *own* a cat. A cat owns *you*. And it was not a pleasant experience--for either of us."

But his hand had tightened on her shoulder, the other slipping down the skin of her arm and sending a tingle through her. Kissing her cheek, he'd whispered in her ear,

"Natalie would kill me if anything happened to him--"

"Too late."

"So keep him safe, okay? I'll see you when I get off shift, all right?"

Before she'd been able to answer, he'd slipped out the door, which he'd closed firmly and finally behind him. She'd been left with a cat in a box, assorted cat maintenance utensils, and a squeaky rubber mouse in a shade of yellow that was more than faintly nauseating.

Sighing again, she turned back to her work, determined not to pay any attention to the evidently very healthy feline. Or to the enormous scratches on her cherry wood divan. Or to the large tufts his claws had ripped from her rug. Or even that hideous fur-like thing that he'd expelled during a violent coughing fit.

Especially that.

There was a knock at the door. Janette was on her feet before it opened more than a crack, her eyes meeting and holding those of her feline charge. "Close the door," she said harshly, "you'll let the cat out!"

Alma slipped into the room, the door quickly closing beside her. The blonde was wearing one of her party frocks, a sprig of mistletoe dancing at the top of her current hairstyle, surrounded by ringlets and curls. "Cat?" she asked blankly. Then, catching sight of Sidney, she rushed over to him and scooped him up into her arms, clasping him to her bosom before he could yowl. "Oh, what a darling baby? Is he yours? Ouch!"

Janette hid her smile and turned away, hearing the cat hit the floor and scurry beneath the furniture. "Cats have claws, Alma. Don't worry, it will heal."

By the time she'd seated herself behind her desk, Alma was brushing at her decollete and wincing slightly. "Not before tonight," said Alma sharply. "It wouldn't be the first time--"

Janette raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

But Alma didn't rise to the bait. She stepped carefully in the middle of the room and Janette realized just how tempting those bare ankles in the high heels would be to claws hidden beneath a divan. "Why don't you have a seat?"

"No--I--he's not yours?" she asked again, somewhat nervously.

"I'm watching him for Nicola's friend." She steepled her fingers, amused at seeing Alma without her usual sense of elan intact: "Don't you like . . . cats?"

"Well, I'm a little worried about the armadillo."

Janette blinked and stared at her, even though Alma's eyes were glued to floor level, shifting from one potential cat-hiding place to another. "The what?"

"The armadillo? Dwight? He lives in the basement." Alma glanced up at her and shook her head. "Come on, Janette, you must be getting senile. I asked you if we

could have Dwight ages ago and you said yes."

Her fingers folded together of their own accord when Alma used the word 'senile,' but Janette managed to keep her smile in place. "I told you that you could have a pet, but . . . why an armadillo?"

"It's expected."

"By whom?"

Alma broke her survey of potential attack sites with another long-suffering look. "You just don't watch the right films, do you?"

As Janette believed that prolonged conversation with Alma could drive even a saint to insanity, she simply shook her head and turned back to her paperwork. "Why are you here? You told me yourself the clientele is non-existent, or too depressed to be of any use. I thought we were closing early so you could all attend Emile's party? It's nearly midnight."

"It *is* Christmas Eve."

There was a hesitant note in Alma's voice she hadn't heard before. Startled, Janette looked up. "You've given everyone their presents?" she asked suspiciously, wondering if Alma had managed to disrupt the simplest of holiday traditions.

"Yeah. Just like you said." She paused again. "You're old. Older than all of us."

"Yes," said Janette slowly, so intrigued by an appearance of original thought that she decided to let the age comment pass.

"And, well, everyone we knew is dead or they think we are. Our family, our friends--there's nobody left, except us. Does it--does it ever get easier?"

Of all the things she might have expected from Alma, she never could have dreamed this conversation. Alma stood expectantly, twisting her hands together, waiting for an answer.

Janette rose and walked around the desk. She took Alma's hands in her own and answered softly, "No, *cherie*. It doesn't get easier."

"I thought--I thought I should ask," was the answer. Then Alma pulled away. "Oh, I almost forgot!"

"Forgot what?"

Again, Alma seemed hesitant, reminding her very much of Nicola's behavior, earlier. "We, uh, kind of got together and got you a present. For the holiday. It's outside."

Janette froze in place as Alma dashed to the door, closing it quickly behind her. A corner of her soul was touched by the gesture, but beyond that--and surprise that her dear charges had actually thought of something other than fashion, music, and fresh young things--was fear. Their income was limited. And, wisely or not, the group often looked to Alma for leadership. She didn't want to *begin* to imagine what Alma might consider a suitable gift.

The banging and scraping at the door did nothing to alleviate the air of unease that settled in her stomach. Janette walked across the carpet and opened the door for the second time that evening.

It was a gold bird cage on a tall stand, with a black bow at the very top. Inside was a sleek black bird wearing a red ribbon.

"Surprised?" asked Alma, peering around the doorway.

With one fluid movement, Janette lifted the cage into the room, her other hand reaching out and snagging Alma's arm. Just as she got the vampiress into the room and the door closed, Sidney streaked by. He batted the closed door lightly with a gray paw, then headed back to the divan, where he proceeded with his grooming as if that has been his destination the entire time.

But Janette had no time to waste on a disgruntled feline and his abortive bid for freedom. Her attention was torn between the bird, which stared at her, unblinking, and Alma, who was positively beaming.

"It's a raven," said Alma proudly. "Like your club."

"I can see that."

"Sort of like a mascot. We'll take care of it and feed it and teach it to talk--"

"No."

"No?"

There was more than a little hurt in Alma's tone, but Janette shook her head as she inspected the cage. "No. This is a club, not a menagerie." The raven cawed at her and she turned away from it, spying an interested Sidney looking on. "Whatever anyone might think. Take it back."

Alma hung her head. "All right. But, they're closed now. It's Christmas Eve."

Janette waved her hand and walked back to the desk. "After Christmas, then. Alma, you--and the others--have centuries ahead of you. Save your money. Invest it. Don't spend it on . . . pets." She shook her head again as she seated herself. "Really!"

"I'll take it back," promised Alma, giving the bird a wistful glance. "But . . . don't you want to go to Emile's?"

She sighed, looking down at the paperwork in front of her, then met Sidney's eyes again. "No. Someone has to show some common sense. And the animals should be looked after. Besides, he never plays enough jazz."

"I'll mention that to him," said Alma.

"See that you do." Janette smiled, nodding at the downcast vampiress. "Give everyone my regards. And, Merry Christmas, Alma."

"Yeah." Alma brightened, the tips of her fangs showing past her pearly smile. "To you, too, Janette. See you in the morning."

Wonder of wonders, Alma remembered to close the door quickly. Janette almost laughed at Sidney's frustrated leap from the divan to the door, but stopped herself when he fixed her with a glare. "You're here for the night," she told him. "Get used to it and behave yourself."

Outside, the music had died down from a dull roar to a hollow echo of silence. She could feel the absence of the others, of their thoughts, and feelings, and their sheer existence.

The raven cawed again, a harsh sound in the silence.

"Yes," agreed Janette. "It's quiet. But the proper atmosphere to do inventory." Glaring at Sidney, she rose to her feet and added, "Can I trust the two of you alone together? Or will there be an incident?"

Sidney looked away, studiously grooming his back paw. The raven hopped on his perch, then turned his back to her.

Shaking her head, Janette picked up a clipboard and pencil. Now she was talking to animals!

Joyeux Noel, indeed!

* * *

"Five--six--seven--"

She counted aloud--*had been* counting aloud--in a variety of languages, for the past twenty minutes, just to break the silence. The club was dark and quiet, a dismal feeling at night, when it should have been filled with thunderous sound and youthful bodies trying to grind themselves into oblivion. She'd even caught herself humming, but stopped that quickly enough. For now, she'd have to satisfy herself with the clink of bottles and the scratch of the pen against paper.

That's when she heard the voices.

They weren't particularly loud, or even hushed. And they seemed to be coming from her office. But how could that be? She'd left no radio or phonograph on. Only the animals were in there--a bird and a cat. Unless the bird could talk, for ravens could sometimes be trained to mimic a voice . . .

Curious, Janette abandoned the clip board at the counter and moved quietly to the door. When placing her ear against the wood proved frustrating, she opened it a crack.

"--Won't be staying long, then."

She couldn't see, but she could hear. The flutter of feathers and a hoarse caw accompanied the statement. The bird *could* talk. Trust Alma not to mention the fact and scare her silly! Then again, knowing Alma, the bird probably hadn't gotten a chance to get a word in edgewise.

What a wonderful idea! The bird would hear a word like 'vampire' and suddenly everyone would know that her club was a meeting place for more than just the local

trendsetters.

That's when she heard the *second* voice.

"Not that I'm any better off. There she goes, without a second thought to me." A soft yowl accented the comment. "But to leave me with *them*! I have enough problem figuring out the no-furs, but these others . . . they smell wrong. All wrong."

There was another flutter of feathers against the bars of the cage, accompanied by raucous laughter. "I've seen even their kind come and go. You're on--what--your second life?"

"Third," corrected the softer voice. "Why? How many lives do your kind have?"

"One. Forever. It's all the same life."

She heard a tingle of metal, Sidney's license jingling against his collar. "Really? It never ends? Even after the dark/cold?"

"Even after. You close your eyes. When you open them, your wings are smaller again, but you know everything you've always known, what every raven's known since the first."

"You *have* seen it all, then," said the cat's voice, with some amount of wonder. "How can you stand to be caged? I was in the box today. He's going to have a hard time putting me back in, I can promise you that."

The bird's answer was preceded by a long, low sound. "It will pass. It all does. I will close my eyes and open them and I will be small and in the world again. Until then, I will wait. And pass the time--hsst!"

She had leaned against the door and it had opened, the noise so small that even she could barely hear it. But the dark-eyed raven appeared to miss nothing. As she entered the room, he ducked his head and said, "Good Christmas, lady."

Eavesdropping from behind a door made it seem almost possible. But as she stood there, looking from the bird, to the cat, and back again, she found herself doubting her sanity. "Am I mad? Or dreaming?" She spun around, expecting to find the others had returned. "It's a trick, isn't it? Nicola has lent them some of his toys. They're hiding somewhere. Or someone's a ventriloquist."

"You're awake enough," said Sidney sharply. Diving from the couch, he padded over to her and tapped her ankle with his paw, his claws sheathed. "And no madder than before. Now pick me up."

Automatically, Janette lifted the cat into her arms, then nearly dropped him when she realized what had happened.

"Sssshush," warned the raven. "Let the lady be. You're only angry because she threatened to cage you again."

"He gouged my divan," protested Janette.

"Wouldn't if you'd given me a proper scratching post."

"Nicola didn't bring one. And I don't know what cats need." Sidney turned over in her arms and she stared at him. "I'm talking to a cat and a bird."

"Raven, if you please," corrected the bird. He hopped from the perch, to the floor of the cage and shook his sleek black feathers. "The clock has struck midnight. It's Christmas Eve." He paused, but when she continued to stare, he cocked his head at her. "Surely, lady, such a long-lived one as yourself must know the legends?"

"So few of the non-furred do," commented Sidney. He tucked his head under her hand. "Just behind the ears, please. Aaaah, that's it. You've got nice long claws. Not like my non-furred."

"But she's not a 'non-furred.' She's a sharp-tooth. They live longer." The raven fluttered again in the cage, seemingly perturbed, until Janette moved closer. "Lady, haven't you *ever* heard us talk?"

"No. Never."

Sidney stretched in her arms, flipping over on his stomach. "By 'us' he means what you call the 'voiceless.' Perhaps you've just never *listened* properly."

"I *would* have noticed," said Janette sharply, wondering if it was true that cats landed on all fours when you dropped them.

Sidney favored her with a yawn that ended in a cat smile. "You didn't notice I needed a scratching post."

"Enough," cawed the Raven. It fixed Janette with one beady eye. "From the last stroke of twelve until the stroke of one on Christmas Eve, all creatures share a common language. We understand one another. And you. And we have made a pact that during understanding we will not harm one another."

Janette glanced down at Sidney, her chances of proving the 'on all fours' wives' tale with live experimentation suddenly dashed. She met the Raven's gaze. "Then I could release you from the cage, and the cat would not chase you? That's so . . . unnatural. Predators do *not* make peace with their prey."

"Your kind speak to the no-furs all the time," said Sidney. "That sharp-tooth who brought me here--*he* speaks to my non-fur often."

She felt the hackles rise along the fur of his back and smoothed them with her hand. "You don't approve?" she asked, purring into his ear.

The cat snuggled into her embrace for a few seconds, then stiffened and leaped from her arms. "Kind stick to kind," he hissed, curling up on the divan. "Sharp-tooths should go away."

"Should we?" asked Janette, her own hackles rising. "And don't hiss at me! I've been hissed at by more dangerous creatures than you!"

"We shouldn't argue," warned the Raven.

Janette sat down on the divan, dumping Sidney to the floor. "Argue? With a cat and a bird? I *am* dreaming."

"You're long-lived," continued the Raven. "I know you've heard the stories. How far back does your memory go?"

"Longer than a cat or a bird," countered Janette.

Sidney hissed, then ducked under the divan as she swatted at him.

"Lady, be kind," said the Raven, his velvet tones broken by scratchy sounds. "The cat, perhaps--they have no more than nine lives. But mine goes back far longer than yours."

"Really?" Janette laughed and leaned forward. "And what, pray tell, have you see, Monsieur Raven?"

"I have seen the sky afire and the earth beneath water, the green destroyed and the green triumphant in return."

"Before the non-furred?" asked Sidney, peeking his head out from under the divan.

"And later," said the Raven. "I saw a man speak to a burning bush. I have seen a god born to a woman who traveled on a great tusked beast. And I have stood on a mountain of skulls and watched three men die against the sky."

"You *say* you have seen these things," said Janette, smirking. "But many could *say* likewise."

"I have seen a woman who would not be as others wished." The Raven fixed her with his beady gaze. "I saw her make a pact to win her freedom, but she was tricked into tighter chains. It was in a place of green hills and blue sky, where white marble rose to touch the clouds and crisp olives dressed the leaves--"

Something in Janette's throat tightened. Rising to her feet, she approached the cage. "Be careful," she warned the Raven. "There are things you have seen that I will not hear."

The Raven bowed his head. "My pardon, lady. But would you have me speak of the darker things I have seen?"

"Oh, the sharp-tooths like those," commented Sidney, sauntering out from beneath the divan. "What have you seen of them?"

"I have seen non-furs sprout paws and claws and fangs. I have heard voices with no flesh nor fur, nor feather nor scale, that screamed in the night. I have seen lights in the sky, smelled death in the wind, and heard thunder beneath the earth." The Raven paused. "If you will, lady, I may speak of your kind."

Janette ran her hand over the bars of the cage, her memory casting back through time, for the sight of a raven, any raven. "So, you have spied on us?"

The Raven fluttered his wings and returned to his perch. "We observe, only. We do not judge. We watch. And we remember all that we see."

"And what will you remember of *us*?" asked Janette, peering through the golden bars of the cage. "Fangs and flashing eyes? Flight and fury? Blood--?"

"Much blood," agreed the Raven, looking to the bottom of the cage. "Oceans of blood." But then he looked up, turning his head to fix her with one eye. "But I have also seen your kind laugh and love and live among the non-furs in the darkness. And I have seen your kind grow warm and breathe and live beneath the sun, age and grow old as the short-lived no-furs, and pass into darkness."

"You *lie*!" hissed Janette, turning away from the cage. "There *is* no way back across!"

Sidney rubbed against her bare ankle to get her attention. "I've heard ravens have forked tongues," he whispered.

"I speak the truth," cawed the Raven loudly. "Believe it or not as you wish, it makes no difference to me."

She was about to turn, ready to throttle the bird with her own hands, when she remembered what he had said about the olives and the marble. Janette paused, considering his words. "It would be magic," she said softly, mulling over the idea in her mind. "A miracle."

"A simple transformation," stated the Raven. "I have seen a statue turn to flesh, to live and love a non-fur. I have seen a light shine for eight days from a temple, where there should have been darkness. I followed the path of three wealthy men across mountain and endless sand, to kneel at the foot of a non-furred cub's crib."

She heard the Raven flutter his wings against the cage again. "You, too, have seen many things, lady. You have seen, but you have not always observed or understood. Some you accept. Some you deny. But there *are* miracles. There *is* magic, call it whatever name you wish. Non-furs who would have died before, now live. Land that would have been left for waste, now flourishes. Fur and fish and fowl who would have disappeared into darkness are still in the world. There are many miracles, lady. They come in all sizes."

"There are ways to go back across?" she asked, almost to herself.

"So I have said."

"You've seen it done?"

"A half dozen times, if not more."

Janette turned on her heel and caught the Raven with a steady gaze. "How?" she demanded, walking toward the cage. "*How* is it done?"

A lesser creature would have wilted beneath that gaze, swooning in charm or fear, paralyzed by her force of will. But the Raven was no lesser creature, as she was beginning to understand. It met her eyes evenly and, for the first time, she felt herself in the grip of something older than herself, older even than her master, LaCroix.

"Would you know, lady?" asked the Raven, his silken voice smooth and sweet . . . and unnerving. "I will tell you the truth, if you ask. On this night, I can speak only the truth. But do you wish to know the truth? What once is heard cannot be unheard. Think, before you ask to hear this thing."

Stunned, she looked down to find Sidney rubbing against her ankles again. "Don't ask," he warned her. "No-furs cannot bear the truth. And from what I've seen of you sharp-tooths, well . . . you prefer dark lies."

Janette almost answered, but stopped herself. Did she want to know the ways to go back across? Not for herself--she was happy as she was. But should there come a day when she found herself in love with a mortal, or when she could no longer bear the moonlight laced with blood and death . . . would it not be reassuring to know there was a way to escape what she had chosen to bring upon herself?

And--Nicola. If she knew, she could not hide the secret from him for long. It was what he most desired. He would promise his undying love and gratitude for such a gift, then would turn mortal and leave her and her world forever, in so short a span of time. She could live somewhere other than Nicola for long periods--she wasn't obsessed, after all. To live forever if Nicola were not somewhere, to laugh at her vanities, chide her for her foolishness, and hold her against the bright and fatal sunshine--that would be a hard thing to bear.

To see Nicola's eyes when the sadness and despair came upon him, to know that she had this chance to save him and did not take it--that would be hard to bear, also.

"Tell me," she said suddenly, whirling and turning back to the cages. She held onto the bars to keep her balance, feeling suddenly lightheaded, inebriated. "Tell me how, Raven. I want to know."

The Raven ducked his head solemnly. "As I promised, I will tell what you ask." His eyes brightened as he turned his head, one eye fixed upon hers. "There is a--Awwwwk!"

The sound was loud and brutal. Janette released the bars of the cage and almost fell, but righted herself quickly. "What? Tell me. What must I know?"

The Raven looked up at her. "Caw! Caw-cawwwwk!"

Just then, she heard the chime of the small clock on her desk toll once--and only once. The hour had ended, as the Raven had said, as the stories had said. They no longer shared a common language. That single hour of Christmas grace was gone.

The Raven could not speak.

Janette found herself speechless--with anger. The sounds she made were guttural,unintelligible, as she cleared her desk with a sweep of her hand, threw an ashtray and glass against the wall to watch them shatter, pounded upon the floor, the wall, the hard wood of the desk . . . until there was little strength left in her.

With the end of the fury came the end of her strength. Like a blind man, she stumbled to her cabinet, opened it and rummaged for some of her private vintage. She pried the cork from the bottle with her long nails, then tilted her head back and drank, sinking to the floor as she did so. Only dimly did she realize that Sidney had left the relative refuge of the space beneath the divan to sit beside her, rubbing the length of his body along her leg.

A few moments more and she licked her lips, the last trickles of blood coming from the bottle. The warmth that spread through her was due to more than the blood.

She'd lost control. Losing control meant destruction. It didn't happen often, but she hated when it did.

Carefully setting the bottle aside, she wiped the smudged makeup from her face with a handkerchief that rested on the cabinet, then smoothed back her hair with her hand in one fluid motion. Yes. She was herself again. This was a disappointment, but she'd gained some small victory this night.

She *knew* there was a way across.

Furrowing her brow, she looked down at Sidney and sighed. "Well, cat, now we know. We know that Nicola isn't doomed in his quest for mortality. The question is, do we tell him?"

Sidney's answer was a long, low yowl.

Which, to her ears, was no answer at all.

* * *

By the time Nicola arrived, she'd managed to hide the evidence of most of her tantrum. True, she'd had to change her dress--from black leather with studs to black lace with ribbons--and fix her makeup, but Janette was certain after careful scrutiny in the mirror that Nicola would never notice that she'd had a little 'episode.' Men so seldom *did* notice those things, if one was careful.

His tap on the door was hesitant. She never looked up from the mirrors he'd placed on the desk top, where she was arranging her hair. "Come in, Nicola."

She heard the door close behind him and the soft step of his boots upon the carpet, but still she fussed with a pin that would not stay in place--until a package wrapped in horribly clashing red and green paper was thrust beneath her nose, obscuring her view of the mirror. "Merry Christmas," said Nicola, lightly nuzzling her ear, before stepping away.

For the moment, Janette tried to ignore the sudden warmth that rushed through her at his nearness and concentrated on the present, which she'd snatched from his hand as soon as it came into view. Her nails made quick work of the wrapping and -- she allowed it to fall to the floor as she opened the box.

The bracelet was exquisite--gold and emeralds--and a quick look at the box confirmed her suspicion. "This is the same design he made for the Duchess Alexandra. When I asked if Henri could copy it, you bribed him to say no, then had him make one for me. Nicola, what a cheat you are!"

She turned in time to see him flash a grin at her. He stood beside the raven's cage. "If you don't like it--" he said, in mock worry, walking toward her. "I *can* send it back."

Janette snatched her wrist away, the bracelet already dangling from it, and pressed the cold metal to her lips. "I shall treasure it always." Then she dropped her arm and leaned forward, touching her lips lightly to his. "Just as I treasure you."

Nicola backed away, after a moment, returning to the bird cage. Hands in the

pockets of his leather jacket, he walked first one way, then another, surveying it. "It seems I'm not the only admirer to bring you gifts tonight."

"Oh, yes." She waved her hand, enjoying the brief sparkle as the light caught the stones set in her gold bracelet, then joined him beside the cage. "A gift from Alma. And the others."

"Does he talk?"

Her heart paused in her throat, momentarily stifling any attempt she made at speech. But, somehow, reason won. "Why, yes. Of course." She leaned forward to tap her fingernails against one of the cage bars. "The raven, Sidney, and I have had a lovely conversation this evening." When Nicola stared blankly at her through the bars, she met his gaze quite seriously. "Nicola--you can't tell me that you've never heard that animals can speak on Christmas Eve?"

When his lips curled into a smile, she knew her secret was safe. "That story was old when I came across," he chided. Then he looked away from the bird. "And speaking of Sidney--"

Janette walked to the divan and reached beneath it, pulling the reluctant cat from his hiding place. "He's here. Unharmed. And not a sneeze from him." She cradled Sidney in her arms and he settled against her, purring contentedly. "I should think that if you take that mohair sweater away from him, he should be all right. Next time you watch someone's pets, find out if they have allergies."

To her satisfaction, Nicola frowned suspiciously. "How did you know--?"

She reached down and unwound a long white thread from one of Sidney's claws, which she deposited in Nicola's outstretched hand, never losing her grip on the contented feline. "Really, Nicola, you must learn to observe your surroundings. You're supposed to be a detective, are you not?"

His fist closed over the white thread. "I am. And this wouldn't stand up in a court of law. It's circumstantial." His frown deepened as he walked over to her divan and knelt by the damaged leg. "Unlike *this*. Janette, I'm sorry. I didn't think--"

"It's only furniture," she said, with forced gaiety. "Old furniture, at that. I was thinking of having it replaced--"

"By even *older* furniture?"

She matched his smile. Still stroking the cat, she walked over to the bird cage. "Was your night uneventful?"

"Yes, luckily enough. Christmas Eve can get weird sometimes, but this year everything was dead. I noticed you closed the club early."

Her back toward him, she shrugged slightly. "Not much of a crowd. You could say it was 'dead' here, too. The others had parties to attend. I told them to close."

He was behind her, passing her without touching, then walking around the cage. Now it was his turn to play with the golden bars, to test their pitch with a flick of his finger. "I'm sorry if Sidney's presence detained you."

"Not at all. I didn't feel much like a party this year." She looked up, eyes meeting his. "I was hoping we could spend the day together. Reminiscing, if you like. About old times."

His expression darkened and she cursed herself for handling the matter in such a clumsy fashion. Nicola turned away, but she could see the tension in his shoulders, the sudden wall he'd thrown up around himself. "No, I don't think so."

"You are such a boor, sometimes." When he turned, stunned, she pouted. "Yes, that's right. Have done with it, Nicola--admit what you are. LaCroix is gone and he was the one who made it difficult for us, for you. It's Christmas. Be at peace with yourself, at least for one day a year."

Her chiding seemed to have had an effect. He walked away, but she could see the hesitation in him. "There *is* no peace for me. Not until I know there's a way back. Not until I'm certain--"

Sidney tensed in her arms. She continued stroking the cat's fur and looked down, at the carpet. Here was the moment. If she was to tell him, *ever* tell him, it would be now.

Or never.

This time it was she who walked behind him. "There *is* no way back across," she whispered, her voice low, but firm. "Tonight, today, Nicola, be what you are. Be with me."

With a wild yowl, Sidney exploded from her arms. His claws raked into her bare skin and she released him, pulling back with a cry. Nicola caught the cat in mid-leap, but encountered no resistance from the angered feline.

Just as quickly, he was by her side, leading her to the couch. "Bad Sidney. Bad. Janette--he's usually not like that--"

She sat down with all gentility, her hands held demurely in her lap, as he dabbed at her cuts with his handkerchief, his other hand gripping most of Sidney, who was trying to escape. It took all of her willpower not to lick the oozing red line that ran down from her bracelet to her forearm, but she refrained. "Cats have claws, Nicola. It's to be expected. At least Sidney's honest with his. Most keep theirs hidden."

Taking his hand, she paused, waiting for him to meet her eyes. "I'm afraid I left my gift for you at my flat. Meet me there." She bit back the word 'please' before it could escape her lips.

He seemed to note the omission. This time, he hesitated only briefly, then nodded. "All right. But I hope you've gotten your wide-screen TV fixed. The game should be spectacular."

Sighing, Janette rose from the divan. "Sports! Nicola, we've spent the better part of eight centuries together, learned countless 'games' that are far more amusing, and you want to watch a televised sporting event?"

But when she faced him, he was smiling. And she knew that he was only teasing. "Go!" she said, pointing to the box he'd brought with him. "Collect your cat toys. You

can leave that feline at your own flat for the day. I can't see that he could do any worse there than he's done here--especially if you keep that sweater or whatever else it is out of his reach."

Nicola hurriedly bundled Sidney's artifacts into the box, not paying all that much attention to the spilled food and water he scattered across the floor. He was just about to try to stuff Sidney into the cat carrier--the feline screeching loudly--when Janette put a hand on his shoulder. Gesturing toward the large cardboard box, she said, "He doesn't like to be caged up. Toss him in the box. That should save your car upholstery."

Sidney's gaze, which had been hate-filled until that point, softened considerably. She nodded at the cat, then turned her back to them. "I have to lock up here. By the time you drop off the cat--"

"I'll see you there."

She turned, then walked toward the office door, opening it for him. For a moment, he paused. "Janette, thank you. I can't tell you how much I appreciate your taking care of Sidney--"

"You can tell me in detail . . . later." Leaning forward, she planted a kiss on his cheek, then stood at the doorway, watching him make his way through the darkened club, Sidney's eyes peering over the top of the box at her.

Once he was gone, she turned toward the cage. The raven stared at her. How much did he know, or remember? She'd never given much thought to animal, or bird, intelligence before. Was what he claimed to know still locked within him, beyond her reach? Would she have to wait a year to get an answer to her question?

Did she *want* her question answered?

Janette walked quickly to the door of the cage and opened it. Thrusting her hand inside, she caught the bird. He fought, but once outside the cage she could control him easily with two hands. She exited her office and made her way to the back of the club, to the freight door that opened onto the alley.

The metal door was cold, letting forth an inhuman cry from frozen hinges as it opened into the alley. The early morning sky was still dark; stars shone brightly against the blue-black velvet. There was a three-quarter moon in the sky, but it was partially hidden from view by sporadic clouds. And the lightest of snowflakes trickled downward, adding to the several feet of snow already piled against the walls of the alley.

Holding the raven in her hands, she stared into its eyes. "You said you would tell me the truth and you tried--we simply ran out of time," she said softly. "You were right. I don't *want* to know. I'll give you your freedom. But you must do something for me."

The black eyes stared at her, unblinking. Janette licked her lips and continued. "If you *are* all the same, have the same memories, remember this--I will *not* have your kind here again. If you or any like your kind come again, especially on this night, I will wring your feathered neck and drink your heart's blood before you can utter a sound."

With that, she tossed the bird skyward. His wings hadn't been clipped for captivity, so that after a faltering start, he soared upward, into the darkness of the night. Her keen eyes watched him, until she was certain that he was gone. Only then did she close the door, barring it from the inside.

Janette paused for a moment, back against the cold steel door, wondering whether she'd done the right thing, and knowing that this decision would be replayed in her memory time and again. Now that it had been done, it wouldn't be undone. She'd see to that. And with the ravens warned to stay away, there was only one more witness to her treachery.

Smiling as she headed back to her office to get her wrap and car keys, she wondered what Nicola would say when she volunteered to cat-sit for Sidney next Christmas Eve and the Christmas Eve after.

There were, after all, only six cat-lives worth of Christmas Eves left before her secret would be safe . . . forever.

The End

A Vampire In My Stocking

by Jennise Hall and Margaret Newman

INT. RAVEN - NIGHT - December 22, 1993

JANETTE circles the room like a cat on the prowl. Her eyes search the crowd; she's searching for someone. She nods to the DJ as her eyes pass over him. She makes her way to the bar.

JANETTE
Aaron.

The BARTENDER leans in so he can hear her over the loud music.

JANETTE
Where is Alma?

A few of the regulars move a little way down the bar. AARON looks at them, wishing he could join them.

AARON
(intent on the glass he's drying)
She's not here tonight. She went out.

JANETTE
Did she? With whom?

AARON
Uh, a guy she met here last night. When you were gone. I figured you knew . . .

JANETTE
What did this man look like? Was he . . . a regular?

AARON
Never saw him before. Little dude. Four foot five, maybe a little taller.
Bright green suit.

JANETTE
I don't suppose you heard his name?

AARON
(stepping back a bit)
Uhh, no.

JANETTE wheels around. AARON heads down the bar eager to deal with customers. As if

they since her anger the partyers manage to keep their distance as JANETTE stalks back to her office.

INT. RAVEN - NIGHT - DECEMBER 24, 1993

Music Blares. Punk kids dance, SPIKE among them. At the bar JANETTE accepts a glass of her special vintage. She takes a sip then spits it out as though it were milk (or one of Natalie's shakes).

Across the dance floor the crowd parts for a spry little woman of at least 60, stylish grey hair, mid-calf red suede boots, green suede skirt, white silk blouse, red jacket and a small red purse. This is CLARA.

She whispers a question to SPIKE. He points to JANETTE, who rushes to join them. CLARA pulls a mint out of her purse, puts it in SPIKE'S hand and pats his cheek.

JANETTE
Can I help you?

CLARA
Yes dear. I'm looking for the owner.

JANETTE
I am the owner.

CLARA
How wonderful. Is there some place, quieter?

JANETTE
Oui, of course.

INT. RAVEN - JANETTE'S OFFICE - NIGHT

JANETTE allows CLARA to enter the office before her. JANETTE scowls as CLARA examines the furnishings.

JANETTE
How can I help you?

CLARA
I'm Clara.

JANETTE waits for CLARA to say something, but CLARA only stares back waiting for JANETTE to...

JANETTE
I'm Janette. And . . . ?

CLARA
Oh, yes. I'm looking for one of my employees. Jemmi. He's four foot five, wears a lot of green. He hasn't been at work for nearly a week. His job is extremely important.

JANETTE
I'm sure I'd remember him if I'd seen him.

CLARA
Oh, my. His co-workers said he spoke highly of your . . . club. He wouldn't exactly stick out you know.

JANETTE puts an arm around CLARA'S shoulder and escorts her toward the door.

CLARA
Do you know a young woman named Alma? Perhaps I'll try her. From what I understand she's not . . .

JANETTE stops in her tracks.

JANETTE
Alma!?!

CLARA
. . . exactly the type of young lady I'd choose for one of my boys.

CLARA suddenly realizes JANETTE spoke.

CLARA
You know her? Where can I find her?

JANETTE
She hasn't been here for several days.

She settles her necklace watch back against her formidable bosom.

CLARA
Oh, dear. Oh, dear. This will ruin the schedule. Nicky is so particular about his schedule.

JANETTE
Nicky!?
(under her breath)
Oh, Alma, if you think I was strict before!

JANETTE suddenly realizes that CLARA is sizing her up; the most devilish glint in her eye. For a moment JANETTE appears chagrined.

JANETTE
(regaining her composure)
I think it's time you left I have a business to run.

CLARA
Now see here young lady. You are responsible for this Alma. She has made off with one of my employees and I'm holding you accountable for the inconveniences she has caused.

CLARA presses an index finger to her lips. The twinkle in her eye makes JANETTE nervous.

JANETTE
Can't one of your other . . . ?

CLARA
A splendid idea!

JANETTE
Why are you looking at me like that?

CLARA
Elves, dear. They're called elves. Yes, I think this is the perfect solution.

CLARA produces a tape measure from her small purse. She measures JANETTE'S height, but when she tries to get a chest measurement JANETTE swiftly side steps her.

JANETTE
What are you doing?!

CLARA
The uniform can be a little binding if it's not the correct size.

JANETTE
UNIFORM!!!!

CLARA
Each elf has a specific job to do. I can't simply pull one off their job to cover for Jemmi. At least not at this late time. It would require to much shuffling.

JANETTE
I will not wear a uniform.

CLARA
Nonsense, dear. I realize your kind has no problem with the cold, but you have to admit that as, uh, lovely as that dress is, it is hardly appropriate for visiting little children.

JANETTE'S temper flares. Her eyes glow, her fangs extend. CLARA wiggles her fingers at JANETTE and her sexy black dress becomes green leiderhosen with green tights, green elf boots, and a neon green Jughead cap.

JANETTE is shocked as she realizes her eyes and teeth return to normal seemingly of their own accord.

CLARA
That's really quite unbecoming.

JANETTE
(at the top of her lungs)
I will not leave this office looking like this!

CLARA
You look lovely, dear.

JANETTE
I cannot do this.

CLARA
Don't be so worried.

She pulls a giant neon green clipboard from her purse.

CLARA
All you have to do is make sure no gifts get mixed up. Oh, and occasionally Nicky may need some help setting up toys in homes where children were especially good this year.

JANETTE
Absolutely not!

EXT. SKY - SLEIGH - NIGHT

JANETTE sits, rigid with anger, atop a huge red velvet bag of toys. A jolly man in a red suit commands the eight tiny reindeer pulling the sleigh.

CHRIS
Ho! Ho! Ho!

INT. HOWARD JOHNSON'S - NIGHT - LATER

Giggling fills the room. A small figure, JEMMI, buried under the covers of the bed squiggles up for air.

JEMMI
You aren't tired are you, Alma?

ALMA rises up off the floor by the bed, until she's face to face with her adorable companion. She runs her fingers over his pointed ears. They wiggle at her cool touch.

ALMA
You have the cutest little ears.

He wiggles his slightly arched eyebrows in response, driving her into another fit of giggles.

JEMMI
Shall we rest a while, m'love?

ALMA uses the bed to pull herself up off the floor. As she climbs onto the bed she plants a wet kiss on the tip of his nose.

ALMA
(kisses his right ear)
I'm never tired, Jemmi. Elf blood is just...
(kisses his left ear)
so . . . intoxicating.

She bursts into giggles again, then suddenly stops and looks at him seriously.

ALMA
Ohhh. you're gonna be late for work.

JEMMI
It'll be okay. Just this once.

INT. MIDDLE CLASS LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

It's Christmas! The tree is decorated in a whimsical style. Four stockings have been hung on the chimney with care. There's one each for Mom, Dad, Olivia, and Robert.

JANETTE appears with CHRIS near the fireplace. He carries the bag of toys, she carries a large teddy bear with a bow around it's middle. It's so big she's forced to hold it with both arms.

JANETTE
(sensing movement on the stairs)
We'd better hurry.

She plops the bear on the floor near the tree. It lands on it's face. CHRIS bends to straighten him.

CHRIS
We have time to make the presents happy, Janey.

JANETTE
(bristling)
My name is not 'Janey'. These paltry materialistic items are not real. They cannot BE happy.

He straightens, his eyes narrowing as he gazes at her. This makes her nervous, but she refuses to flinch.

CHRIS
It really is a pity I didn't have this job when you were a child.

There is movement on the stairs, to their left. CHRIS turns first to see a young girl, approximately 8 years old, watching them.

CHRIS
Hello, Olivia! Why aren't you nestled all snug in your bed?

OLIVIA
I heard noises. Are you really Santa?

CHRIS
(chuckling)
Yes, dear. I really am Santa. This is my elf-helper, Janey.

He motions with a gloved hand in JANETTE'S direction. JANETTE, arms crossed over her chest, taps her foot impatiently. OLIVIA looks her over, and frowns slightly.

OLIVIA
She doesn't look like an elf.

JANETTE
I'm not.

CHRIS
She's new.
(he shrugs, chuckling)
How is your brother, Robert?

OLIVIA
He's fine, I guess. Baby brothers are boring.

CHRIS
Oh, but they can be a lot of fun! Do you think he'll like the teddy bear?

The little girl seriously considers the bear with the ribbon around it's stomach. JANETTE exhales loudly, unable to hide her impatience.

JANETTE
You should be in bed, little one. It's late.

OLIVIA
I slept a long time already.

She continues to hold JANETTE in suspicion.

CHRIS
But you are going to have a long day tomorrow. Your grandparents are coming, and your aunt has a special surprise for you. Why don't you sit up here, and rest?

CHRIS takes OLIVIA up, and settles her in the armchair that faces the tree and fireplace. She yawns, and rubs her eyes though she hadn't been sleepy a moment ago.

CHRIS
You can dream about candy canes and sugarplums...

JANETTE tilts her head and watches him work the child.

JANETTE
You hypnotized her.

CHRIS
(chuckling)
Power of suggestion, my dear. She'll remember us only as a dream.

He looks at JANETTE, a true smile on his face.

CHRIS
You'll do the suit justice yet, Janey.

JANETTE
(as they disappear)
My name is not Janey!

INT. NATALIE'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

The room is filled with Christmas decorations, topped off with the largest Christmas tree that would fit.

On the television the last few frames of "It's a Wonderful Life" roll. NICK's attention is obviously not on the television screen. He watches NATALIE sleep, in her oversized Christmas sweatshirt and thick comfy red and green socks. He gently removes her feet from his thigh and heads into the kitchen.

INT. NATALIE'S APARTMENT - KITCHEN - NIGHT

NICK opens the refrigerator, pulls out a bottle, uncorks it (with his teeth), and pours a small glass of dinner. Suddenly he hears voices. He heads into the living room to check it out.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

NICK pokes his head out of the kitchen. He sees SANTA nip Christmas candy off a small silver tray.

Then JANETTE, cursing under her breath, shoves presents under the tree as quickly as she can.

NICK
Janette?

He doubles over with laughter.

JANETTE
Nichola.

NICK
Natalie. You have to wake up.

JANETTE
(to SANTA)
I have finished! Let's go!

NATALIE stirs.

CHRIS
It's a shame you can't try these candies. They're delicious.

With his vampire quickness NICK joins NATALIE on the sofa.

NICK
Nat!

She opens her eyes.

NATALIE
Santa Claus. Nick, I out grew this a long time ago.

NICK
(barely able to speak through laughter)
He's real. Look who's with him.

NATALIE
My Camera!

She bounds up off the sofa.

NATALIE
You don't mind, do you, Santa?

CHRIS
Of course not.

She returns from the bedroom a moment later with her camera. CHRIS sits in one of the dining chairs and pats his knee.

CHRIS
Just sit right here and let your young man take the picture. Janey, why don't you take my other knee?

JANETTE
Never!

NICK is barely able to hold the camera steady.

NICK
Janette, you're going to have to explain this, you know.

NATALIE
Hurry with the picture, Nick. They've got a busy night.

JANETTE
Please, Chris.

CHRIS smiles gregariously at JANETTE, who surrenders and plops forlornly on his knee.

JANETTE
You will pay for this, Nichola.

NICK
I'm sure I will.

NATALIE melts into gales of laughter. SANTA wiggles his fingers and the two disappear.

INT. HOWARD JOHNSON'S LOBBY - NIGHT - DECEMBER 25, 1993 - 4:30 AM

The Night Desk Clerk, LEWIS, looks up at the sound of the door opening. He sees an older woman dressed in a casual Christmas outfit with heavy, fur lined coat.

LEWIS
May I help you, ma'am?

CLARA
Why, yes, young man. You certainly can. I understand a particular couple rented a room here a few days ago.

LEWIS
That's private information, ma'am.

CLARA
Good, this is a private problem. The boy I am looking for is about four feet tall or so. They do grow so fast!

She walks around the counter so that she can see the computer better.

LEWIS
You can't come back here!
(losing his cool)
This is private information, the safety and security--

CLARA
Oh, tut, tut! Nicky rarely loses his temper. Jemmi's in no real danger. Neither is that floozie he's run off with. Ah,
(tapping a key)
Here we go!

LEWIS
I'm going to have to call the cops!

CLARA
Now, Lewis, that isn't any way to behave. Your mother taught you better. Oh, look, Highlander is on! That Adrian is such a nice, well mannered young fellow . . .

INT. HOWARD JOHNSON'S - ALMA AND JEMMI'S ROOM - A FEW MINUTES LATER

The place is a mess. Blankets over the window. Remains of meals for JEMMI are on the floor around the door. Pillows are tossed about the room. A bundled lump is in the center of the bed.

Knock at the door. CLARA can be heard from the other side.

CLARA *(O.S.)*
Jemmi? Jemmi, dear, this is Mrs. Kringle. Do open the door, sweety!

The lump in the middle of the bed jumps. There is a struggle to find an opening. JEMMI's head pops out the end, hair dishelved, eyes bleary.

JEMMI
Mrs. Kringle? Mrs. Kringle??

He says her name repeatedly, stunned that he has been found. And found by her.

EXT. JEMMI AND ALMA'S ROOM - SAME TIME

CLARA looks around. No one is watching.

CLARA
Oh, bother!

She blinks out of sight.

INT. ALMA AND JEMMI'S ROOM - A MOMENT LATER

CLARA
There you are, you naughty elf!

The lump wriggles more and ALMA'S head appears at the other end. She is pale, hair a mess.

ALMA
(in her best Janette tone)
Who are you?!

JEMMI
This is Mrs. Kringle. THE Mrs. Kringle.

CLARA
Janette has been quite worried about you, Alma. You both have been very bad, and very insensitive. Now put a rush on, Jemmi.

CLARA starts going about the room, straightening it up, and collecting clothes. She clucks her tongue occasionally. The two in the bed start to unwind, and sit up--suddenly quite modest about their bodies.

JEMMI
Uh, how's Mr. Kringle doing, ma'm?

ALMA is the first off the bed, wrapped in one of the sheets.

CLARA
Oh, just fine! That dear Janette helped out. She covered your disappearance, so we never missed a beat with the schedule.

ALMA freezes.

ALMA
(shoves hair out of her face)
Janette? Janette helped pass out presents?

CLARA
Yes, and she did an excellent job!

ALMA begins giggling again. Then suddenly stops.

ALMA
She's going to push me into the sunlight . . .

JEMMI swallows nervously, the weight of his actions settling heavily on his narrow shoulders.

INT. RAVEN - DAY

The club is empty. ALMA blinks into the room. She's dressed. Her hair is a bit less disheveled, but her makeup is slightly smeared. In the background, SPIKE saunters down the hall. He sees ALMA and rushes forward.

SPIKE
Hey, Alma! You missed a killer party last night. This old lady came in. Oh, yeah, Janette was looking for you.

ALMA
I told her to send me to Nick's.

JANETTE blinks into the room. SPIKE and ALMA'S jaws drop at the sight of JANETTE in her elf uniform.

JANETTE
Alma. You and I are going to have to have a . . .

JANETTE suddenly notices their expressions. She looks down; realizes she's still in uniform. She stomps off toward her office.

ALMA and SPIKE look after JANETTE then at each other. They jump at the sound of the door slamming.

SPIKE
Man, I could swear I saw smoke coming out of her ears.

JANETTE (O.S.)
GET ME OUT OF THIS COSTUME!!!!!!!!!

ALMA
Maybe I should find somewhere else to sleep for a while.

EXT. NORTH POLE - DAY

Lots of snow. Buildings in the distance. A large MAN IN RED and a tiny MAN IN GREEN walk towards a large warehouse seperate from the other buildings. The MAN IN RED takes out a key ring, unlocks door of warehouse, and they enter.

INT. CAVERNOUS WAREHOUSE - DAY

To the left of the main door is a huge stack of blocks, 2 inches x 2 inches, that stretches down the length of the building. Several cans of paint stand in the middle of the warehouse with one lone three-legged stool.

CHRIS
This is what we've decided, Jemmi. Mrs. Kringle was determined you learn the error of your ways.

CHRIS sighs, shaking his head. JEMMI's shoulders slump. He knows what is coming.

CHRIS
You are to paint these blocks. All of them. No mistakes, no creative bursts of style. Just plain and simple, m'boy. Red, blue, green, yellow, white. Set them on this side when you're done.

CHRIS points to the empty side of the warehouse.

JEMMI
Sir--

CHRIS
Now, Jemmi, this isn't negotiable. It was this or,
(he pauses, JEMMI flinches)

JEMMI
No, sir, really--

CHRIS
Yes, it's this or painting the faces on Cabbage Patch Dolls.

JEMMI shudders.

JEMMI
I like painting blocks. I'll do a very good job, sir.
(sighing)
A very good job.

CHRIS pats JEMMI on the shoulder.

CHRIS
I know you will, son, I know you will.

FADE TO BLACK - PERRY COMO SINGING IN THE DISTANCE

The End

Angel Crossing

by Susan M. Garrett

There was snow on the streets and in the sky. LaCroix turned up the collar of the overcoat, bothered less by the cold than by the inconvenience of the few cold, wet flakes with enough audacity to melt on his neck and drip down his back. Turning his head, he caught a glimpse of himself in a store window, then stopped and met his own gaze in the glass, oblivious to the crowds that hurried along the sidewalks.

He had not seen a mirror in some months--had banished them, in fact, from his hiding place--and was neither completely pleased nor repulsed by what he saw. The worst of the scars had healed some time ago, aided by a constant infusion of fresh, warm blood from any source he could find. The corner of his lip rose slightly at the thought that money could, indeed, buy happiness . . . at least for a vampire.

His smirk hadn't changed. His bright eyes, if anything, we brighter, fueled by hunger and forced inaction. It took all of his will not to rise into the air and send the shoppers screaming in panic.

But his senses had not been lost enough to make the Enforcers aware of his return. He had regained his mind not long after fleeing Nicholas' loft in agony, rent equally by betrayal, and the stake driven into his chest, and the flame. Only later he'd realized how close his former student had come to piercing his heart that night--in *so* many ways. It was a will to survive that had driven him from that place and to a safe haven. The cold, hard cash of the mortal world had kept him invisible while he healed, pursuing quieter interests during his convalescence.

Dimly, LaCroix was aware that the mortals gave him a wide berth, veering around him as he stepped closer to the lit store window. He didn't care. A cold finger traced the line down his cheek, beside his left eye--that would be gone in a few more days of fresh feeding. He was the same in most respects. In all respects. But one.

His amusement at Nicholas' constant defiance, the flaunting of his authority, had passed into the darkness with the flames that had been meant to destroy him. There were no more chances. He would end their relationship. Soon.

Looking beyond his image, into the store window display, he came to himself again. LaCroix ignored his reflected frown and took stock of the items. It would seem that he had taken more time to heal than he'd thought--the holidays were upon the mortal world. Which explained the furious crowds and blinking lights, the unnatural abundance of red and green, the screaming infants and angry traffic horns. And--he winced--that abysmal music, played with the deft precision of a rogue elephant in heat.

The horn trio stood by a red metal pot--he could see them reflected in the glass without turning. They were collecting for some charity. If there *were* any power in heaven, their proceeds would go for music lessons. But the other mortals smiled and

pressed bills or tossed change into the collection utensil. He wondered what denomination he could give that would persuade them to stop their infernal racket and move to another location . . . but knew any amount he offered would be met by wonder, thankfulness, and an intense need to guard their profitable spot against all comers.

Sighing, he looked back into the window again . . . and noticed a mortal standing some yards behind him. There was nothing unusual about him--or was it her? A long winter coat like his own hid a multitude of sins or virtues. And if virtue wore a face, that was it--clear features framed by long, blond hair that curled, lips that were red and full like roses fresh from spring vines, and eyes of a singular blue that reminded him of the stillness of the moonlit water he'd seen once, off Crete.

LaCroix turned, but the stranger was gone. His vision was suddenly obscured by the scurrying crowds, the frantic mortals moving to and fro, trying to outrace the ends of their pathetically short lives. They took their joy where they could, even in the hurly-burly excitement of an annual celebration that was composed of equal parts tension, turmoil, and elation. It was just as well pleasure was so ephemeral.

And one of the reasons eternity seemed so dreadfully long . . .

The stranger was no longer there. Quirking an eyebrow, LaCroix waited, hands clasped behind his back, strolling up and down the sidewalk. He was old enough to take some pleasure in surprises of this type--they broke the monotony of forever into small bits of here and now. But his surprise was turning to concern. Was the stranger one of his own kind?

That would never do. He was trying to keep hidden, until he felt strong enough, confident enough of his own powers to return to face his former friends and take back what was his own. To have another stumble on him was an unfortunate occurrence. Perhaps his haste in returning to the world may have condemned this poor unfortunate to a premature meeting with his ultimate destiny.

"Cold night," said a voice, from beside him.

LaCroix prepared a scathing rejoinder, something salacious enough, delivered in the proper tone, that would ward off unwelcome mortal familiarity. He turned--

And the words stuck in his throat. For there was his blond stranger, looking no less wondrous in close proximity than he had at a distance . . . if it was a 'he.' He still wasn't certain and the voice was even enough to have betrayed nothing of gender. There was something in the perfection of both male and female, despite the worn denim jeans and generic leather boots that could be seen beneath the long, brown woolen coat.

"Cold, for mortals," he answered, so quietly that only one of their own would hear. His words produced no frost in the air--for there was not enough heat in his body to warm it--and he watched out of the corner of his eye to see what might come from the stranger's lips.

The stranger never looked at him, wearing a pretense of disinterest as finely honed as his own. "Cold, yes. But a warm time for them, as well. Do you find you envy them?" The blue eyes fixed on his as that perfect sculpted face turned toward him. "So many of you do. You remember too well what it was like. It is your curse . . . and

your blessing."

There was no mist on the air as the stranger spoke, but neither did he see the hint of undeath in those mesmerizing eyes. For a moment, he was held by that gaze . . . but once that moment had passed his heart filled with anger and he strode swiftly away, parting the crowd with rough shoves, refusing to look over his shoulder.

LaCroix continued to walk for a city block, perhaps further, then stopped at the mouth of an alley formed by two buildings. Darting quickly to the left, he lost himself in the shadows and waited. Had he been sick two years, ten years, two hundred years, he would never have lost those inbred predatory instincts that had served him throughout his life, and afterward.

There was a flash of gold against pale skin, just as the stranger reached the mouth of the alley. A look down at the lit sidewalk outside confirmed that he had left no footprints in the snow--his tread firm, but lighter even than air.

Curiously enough, the stranger also left no mark in the white. Perhaps he would leave no mark in the world, after departing it so abruptly.

Instinctively knowing when the stranger's back was turned, LaCroix sprang, his fangs aching for the taste of blood, his eyes wide and wild and filled with lust and hunger. He should have caught the stranger unaware.

But the stranger turned. And in the second he crossed the space between them, the stranger had raised his hands, catching both of LaCroix's wrists before his talons could sink into the flesh beneath that long coat. They stood for an instant, nose to nose.

"Who are you?" hissed LaCroix. "*What* are you?"

"Who I am would mean nothing to you. *What* I am--you should know." There was a brilliant light in the stranger's eyes, so intense that LaCroix looked away quickly, some inner voice warning him that to look too long into that white at the bottom of the blue depths would drive him mad or blind. Still snarling, he twisted away, but the stranger released his grip, so that he was free.

There had been no pressure, but LaCroix massaged his wrists, still feeling the tingle of the stranger's touch on his skin. He took a step or two away, turned his back to show that he was not afraid. "You've chosen in error. Go to Nicholas. He bent his knee to your God while he was still warm and his heart cringes from Him now that he's cold. *He* will heed your voice, Angel, not I."

And the Angel, for that is what the stranger was--he was a fool not to have seen it before and blamed that on his recent illness--laughed. The sound was like the chiming of the bells at Matins. "You should know us from before then. We have always been here, Master LaCroix. The name and the appearance changes, but nothing eternal does. That is why we *are* eternal. Whereas you have nothing more than extended existences, we change less than do the stars in the sky."

"Then why come to me?" Hands outstretched, he smiled and faced the Angel. "Have I offended Him only now?"

The corners of the Angel's lips twisted, mimicking his own. "Hardly. The list of your

evils outstrips all of your kind and most--save a few--of mortal kind. As does the list of your good deeds. But then, you have walked in the world for quite some time. I make myself known to you *now* because it has been requested."

LaCroix touched his long-fingered hand dramatically to his chest, the gesture accompanying a shallow bow. "Not by me, Sir Angel. So, off on your way, if you would be so kind."

The smile disappeared from those rose-red lips and something in LaCroix was disappointed--the loss marred the perfection of that face. Or, perhaps, the mock-sneer made it *less* perfect . . . and so more attractive to him.

The Angel shook his head. "Because you do not see me, does not mean that I should go from you. I am always with you, in some form."

This, indeed, was news. LaCroix searched his ancient memory for some trace of those utterly unforgettable eyes, and found none. Except . . . perhaps a flash of a glimpse out of the corner of his eye when in a crowd. Speaking with Janette, a feeling that there was someone at his shoulder, a lock of golden hair shining in the candlelight, proving to be a phantasm of imagination when he turned. Had he always been accompanied by this being?

The thought both intrigued and enraged him. His finger to his lips, the other hand on his hip, he regarded the Angel thoughtfully, holding back the anger that burned in his chest. "Sir Angel, are you telling me that you are . . . my guardian?"

His voice left no question as to the absurdity of the notion. A lesser being's cheeks would flame with embarrassment when addressed in such a tone. But the Angel merely shook his head again, his face a study of perfect, unmoving marble.

"Guardians are the spirits that watch over mortal souls. When one has gone across, the guardians are left behind, and given new mortals to guard." There was a subtle flicker of the cheek, perhaps the beginning of a smile that was kept in check. "*Your* guardian was in such a state after you left the mortal world that it was centuries before the angel could be reassigned. Such a thing is not done, Master LaCroix. It simply is *not done.*"

Again, LaCroix gave a slight bow, and met solemn gaze with solemn gaze, but his voice still fenced with that note of mockery. "Your pardon, then. And that of your fellow Angel. I shall try to be less taxing to my Guardian in my next mortal existence." He paused, an eyebrow arching as he asked, "But if you do not care for me, as any good guardian should--and I can assure you, mine was *most* negligent in his duties--why must you haunt *my* centuries? Or, if I am not protected, may I suppose that you are to protect others *from* me?" He shook his head and made a sound by flicking his tongue against his teeth. "Tsk. Tsk. Then I should think you negligent in your duties, as well. Is there no competence in heaven? Or is efficiency yet another sin that sends a soul to perdition?"

Again there was no movement on the Angel's part, save a slight flick of his wrist, a dismissal of the caustic remarks. "Think, Master LaCroix--as you are so proud of your intellect--if a Guardian is an angel of life, then what must those who watch over your kind be?"

The words came unbidden to his lips, escaping before he could taint them with

sarcasm. "The . . . Angel of Death."

The light in those bright eyes gleamed again. "*An* angel, only. We care for those souls you toss to the darkness in your bloodthirst, or whose lives, and hearts, and bodies are broken on the racks of your whims."

"You must find this difficult duty," said LaCroix. He smiled again, as a thought began to germinate in his brain. "Even . . . distasteful."

The Angel looked away, not meeting his eyes. "Our duty is what we are given--no more and no less. We do not act, we only watch, until souls are given into our care."

"And what if I would be free of your . . . services?"

He got a reaction--which, in and of itself, was a small triumph. The Angel's head swung quickly, their eyes meeting. "You have no choice. Those souls would be cared for by others, it is true. They would not be harmed by the loss. But you--" Again, there was a reaction--he was elated to elicit so much with a single question--as the Angel's brows furrowed and those blue eyes looked elsewhere for enlightenment.

"You cannot say what would happen?" asked LaCroix, taking a step closer to the Angel. He turned his head, as he moved past the Angel's shoulder, asking, "Or . . . don't you know?"

He continued until he was a few steps away, smiling secretly to himself. The tumult in the Angel's heart was mirrored on its face and he exulted in that moment. Was there, perhaps, more that he could accomplish? Strike a blow against the hand that held everything . . . save himself?

At last the Angel answered, a tremor in its voice that had not been there before. He felt those eyes upon his back but would not turn to face them. "I cannot say what would happen," the Angel admitted. "And . . . I do *not* know. It has never happened before. But I beseech you, Master LaCroix, do not travel this road. No good can come of it."

"Ah, but I know little of good," said LaCroix, filling his voice with the slick, oily tone he'd found so persuasive in the past. "Shall we say--" he turned quickly and startled the Angel, "that this idea ought to be investigated? Knowledge is supposed to be good, is it not?"

"When tempered with wisdom--"

"A minor point." He waved his hand, dismissing the idea, then stood beside the Angel. He hesitated only a moment before placing his arm over the Angel's shoulder, then ignored the tingle that ran along his flesh at the point of contact, even beneath the cloth of his coat. "If what you say is true, then we have been together a *long* time. Which, by definition, means we are friends, of a sort. And friends should assist each other in matters of this type."

He walked with the Angel as he talked, to the alley mouth and back. The Angel in turn, seemed bewildered at this unaccustomed familiarity, the very discussion causing it distress. "No. It cannot be done. You cannot simply *request* the removal of an angel."

"Perhaps," said LaCroix, "we might make a wager of sorts. I--" LaCroix tapped his chest, "will try to do something. And you," he pointed to, but did not touch the Angel, "will try to stop me."

The Angel halted, but did not shake off his arm or turn away from this sudden, odd companionship. "I told you--I cannot act. I can only observe. And . . . it's Christmas Eve."

LaCroix met the Angel's eyes and let the question appear in his expression. "Yes?"

The Angel stared at him. "You will not be able to commit an evil act against mortal or your own kind until the bells toll mid-night."

"Midnight?" LaCroix left the Angel and turned his back to him, letting the smile of triumph lazily cross his lips. "There are many hours until midnight. And, I promise you, I do ten evil things before breaking my fast each twilight."

"But not *this* night," said the Angel, firmly.

He started to protest, then stopped and stroked the side of his nose with his finger, thinking. The Angel was right. He had done nothing overtly anti-social with regards to the laws of God, man, nature, or the city of Toronto. Then again, he hadn't yet broken his fast. And what a wonderful way to start the evening--have a healthy meal of fresh blood and rid himself of this troubling interloper once and for all!

"But what if I *could*?"

When he looked back, the Angel had turned away. Hands folded together, the face was serene, as if in prayer. Something about that perfection needled him, yet he was enthralled at the sight, so that when the Angel opened its eyes and turned to him, he was caught unaware.

But the Angel seemed not to notice his surprise, or his scowl. The golden head bowed, slightly. "Master LaCroix, you may have three chances, of your own choosing, to perform an evil deed by the first stroke of mid-night. If you succeed, I will cease to accompany you, if that should be your wish. But if you should fail, then there will be no more said of this matter and you will forswear the taking of mortal life . . . for eternity."

It had seemed promising, at first. LaCroix licked his lips and turned away from the Angel, considering the challenge. To be rid of any divine supervision would finally free him. But if he should fail--there would be no breaking that particular oath. Retribution would be swift and terrible, even beyond his imagining.

And yet, could it be *that* difficult to sin again? He'd had so much practice over the centuries. Good or evil, it mattered not to him as long as he was amused or his hungers satisfied. To perform an evil act should prove a simple matter.

He hesitated only a moment before nodding and looking over his shoulder at the Angel. "*If* I should agree, you will not be able to interfere?"

"I observe, only," repeated the Angel, its marble face betraying no sign of emotion, approval or censure. "I will not act. I may, perhaps, question you, but I cannot stop you. I will trust Nature and circumstance to prevent harm."

This time, he took no pains to hide the smile that slithered across his lips. "Agreed, Sir Angel." He extended his hand, to seal the pact.

There was a moment's pause before that marble hand, almost as white as his own, reached for his. Where their skin touched, there was an electricity and warmth almost too much for him to bear, a tingling that drove downward, through his skin, to his very bones, and what might have been left of his soul, if he yet had one.

But LaCroix maintained the hold and, indeed, took his other hand to hold the Angel's, his eyes poring over the shape and surface as he studied it. For it *was* perfect. When compared with his own, scarred from a life of warfare, work, violence, and mortal cares, the Angel's hand seemed as untouched and pure as that of a day-old infant, though adult in make and nature. The fingernails were pearl, some inner light shining with opalescence through the milky sheen. The fingers were well-made and well-spaced, long and slender, the joints crisp, the ligaments pliable. These were the hands of an artist.

Without releasing the Angel, LaCroix looked up to meet its eyes. They were perplexed at his interest, but calmly patient. "Tell me," he asked, whispering his awe and admiration. "Do you play?"

And the Angel smiled, with such beauty and warmth that LaCroix felt his heart might stop its slow, almost imperceptible beat. "Yes," came the answer, the voice holding equal measures of joy and pride. "The lyre and the harp."

LaCroix looked again at the hand he held and nodded, envying heaven's gifts and hating himself for entertaining even the notion that the divine might hold some attraction for him, other than the satisfaction of his simple lusts. Such music these hands could make!

"If I should fail this challenge, would you--*could* you consider playing for me, at some time?"

The question was presumptive, insolent, and again annoyed him--to admit defeat before the challenge had yet *begun*? But for the possibility of experiencing such music . . . he could forgive himself the error.

The Angel did not speak at first and he looked up, to see what it had not answered. And in those blue eyes, with the brilliant white shining at the depths, he knew that the Angel *had* played for him before. The memory of the distant echo brought a smile to his lips, for it was the music of perfection that had spurred him on to his own efforts, after coming across. Before he had realized that even the undead had limits not known by mortals. And when he began to seek out those mortals whose talents could faintly compare with the melodies and harmonies that sang through him, at passing moments, or caught on the voice of the wind.

Even during his convalescence, when anger was not enough to sustain him and darker thoughts crowded his mind, the symphony of sound had occurred, lifting the melancholy from him. It reminded him that his continued existence would be better than any alternative. And that the end of forever would mean the end of the melody.

He saw all that in those ocean-pure eyes and wondered if he had bargained in haste, only to repent at leisure. To lose would mean he would be forced to drink distilled or bottled blood only and take care with his temper around mortals, bowing to the

current rules of *polite* vampire society. To win would mean the end to any pestering presence of divinity . . . and the loss of that music that served him as his missing soul no longer could.

But he'd agreed. His pride could brook no opposition on that point. He *must* win. It was his nature, to win at all costs. That was why he'd survived these centuries.

So many, empty centuries . . .

LaCroix released the Angel's hand and turned away, letting the sense of self fill him. There could be no doubts if he were to succeed, not against the hand of heaven. "Let us begin," he said, rising into the air.

Time enough had passed during their conversation that the crowds had thinned to nothing. It was, after all Christmas Eve, and the mortals were hurrying back to their hearths and loved ones, in an attempt to fill their little lives with some joy and meaning. He flew high and looked to see the Angel. But there was no sign of the spirit, save a warmth that touched his heart now and again. It was near. It was following, on its own wind and wings.

And it would be present at his moment of triumph.

He knew his destination would yield him some opportunity and rejoiced inwardly when he spotted a lone shopper standing beneath the few lights still lit outside the mall. The woman was loaded with packages, pacing to and fro to ward off the cold, and halting expectantly at the slightest glimpse of car lights in the distance. She was expecting salvation, delivery from this last-minute shopping spree.

Landing, he decided that this one, at least, would never see the home and hearth again.

There was brown hair beneath the woolen cap, bright eyes that flashed between worry and anger and fear--for herself or for others he cared not. He approached quietly and saw the perfect opportunity to flaunt his power before his angelic observer.

A package lay in the snow, fallen from one of the many bags she held in her arms, gifts precious enough not to rest in the snow or icy plowed parking lot beneath her feet. He picked up the package and made a noise, clearing his throat to get her attention. "Miss? Is this yours?"

She started, jumping away and losing more packages. He could smell the sudden fear from her, heard the rapid beating of her heart, and forced himself not to lunge and take what he wanted from her without the preliminaries. He wanted to impress the Angel, show the proper seduction of the innocent.

Like most mortals, she was so easily distracted. Laughing, he started gathering up her packages in his arms and, after a second's pause, she followed suit, matching his pretense of amusement without realizing how good of an actor he might be. When the packages were gathered, she wiped back a lock of hair that had escaped from her hat with her snowy mitten. It was almost touching, her smile of gratitude.

"Thank you."

"My pleasure." He looked at their surrounding and frowned, with what he hoped was an appropriate look of concern. "You shouldn't be out here. It's desolate. And it's Christmas Eve."

He didn't care whether she took him for a security guard or friendly bystander. In other cities, this potential victim would have abandoned her packages and run, knowing that flight in the face of the unknown, however friendly it might seem, was safer than possible harm. But in this city they had not yet learned to innately fear the presence of a stranger. Nicholas had chosen his new home well. In time, these people would learn, when their newspapers warned them of innocent women molested and killed in public places on holy nights.

It almost annoyed him there would be no paper printed in the morning.

For her part, she smiled in response, perhaps at the concern he pretended, or the simple appreciation of having someone else to share her cold and lonely vigil. "My husband was supposed to be here an hour ago. But we've been having problems with the car. And the baby hasn't been well--"

Although his smile was sympathetic, none of her words registered beyond the most superficial part of his consciousness. Her heart had slowed. The blood that flowed through her was content to move at average speed. He had lost that rush of adrenaline, given by fear, that would have made her a tasty meal.

Then again, a flash of eyes and fang at the proper time--

LaCroix stared into her eyes, using little of the power at his command. "Why don't you come with me?" he suggested. "There's a warm spot here. We could share a cup of coffee while you wait."

Her bright eyes went dull, glazed, as her will began to surrender to him. It would not be her last surrender that night. "That would be . . . nice," she answered, her voice low as if entranced.

And, in a way, she was. He placed his arm on the small of her back and led her away from the open lot and the sidewalk, to the shrubbery that grew close to the wall of the building. There was enough to conceal him from prying eyes. He wanted no interruptions this time.

Once there, she turned toward him, as he placed the barest pressure on her shoulder. Her eyes were lost. As was her life.

"You have snow on your collar," he said, reaching up his hand, as if to brush it away. Another second and the cloth would be torn from her throat. He would feed and the Angel would know that this night was no different from any other.

A car horn and lights startled him. The woman's trance was so light she turned away, losing contact with his eyes. Her packages spilled again, out onto the sidewalk, and she followed their fall almost mechanically.

He, too, followed the packages and her trail.

The headlights belonged to an old station wagon. The man getting out of the car appeared worried--whether at his wife's possible anger for having abandoned her or

in concern for her safety, LaCroix didn't know and cared less. There was another heartbeat--a child in a car seat, which he could see beneath the frosted window. A babe of no more than a handful of months, asleep.

But the husband had moved forward, quickly hugging his wife and then picking up her packages. "I'm sorry, honey, it was the car again. They just can't seem to fix the damn--"

LaCroix, also, had begun to pick up the packages. It was only when he and the husband reached for the same package at the same time that the other man even registered his presence.

The man straightened, backing up a step, as he looked over LaCroix quickly. Apologies and worry had been replaced by the protective nature of the beast. LaCroix smiled and handed the man the package, wondering if he knew how close he'd come to having his throat ripped out.

After a hesitation, the man accepted the package. Then nodded. His wife turned, having come to herself and again seeming to notice LaCroix. "Thanks for waiting with me," she said, her appreciation evident in her tone.

He heard the relief in her voice as well, but she did not consciously know how close she had come to escaping the oblivion of death. He gave her a slight bow and passed over the last of the packages. "It was my pleasure." Again placing his hand on the small of her back, he led her to the passenger door of the car, which he opened, gallantly. "Allow me."

The husband was still unsure. LaCroix nodded to him over the top of the car. "You should take more care with the safety of your wife, sir. These are dangerous times."

"But it's Christmas," protested the woman. She smiled up at LaCroix from inside the car. Her look was so filled with innocence and belief in the goodness of those that surrounded her that it made his heart stop for the second time that night and caused an ache in his chest that he could not place.

"Yes, it is." He bent low, to tuck the edge of her coat into the car. If he took her now, her could destroy the husband easily enough. Two lives would cement his victory. How *easy* it would be.

But as he straightened slightly, to get a better purchase when he lunged, his eyes met those of the child in the back seat--which he'd forgotten. Now awake, the child stared at him, the innocent blue stirring another empty ache in his chest. Those eyes were so like that of the Angel. And why not, as the child was only recently removed from a world other than this?

He froze, and the moment was lost. As a parting gesture, he slipped a wad of bills into the woman's coat pocket--enough to ensure that she never be abandoned again by a defective automobile . . . and a good beginning toward the child's future. In seconds, he had backed away, the door was closed and, with a cheery wave and a cry of "Merry Christmas," the family car roared away, chugging smoke that smelled of burning oil, accompanied by a mechanical sound all too much like the bones of a hanged man rattling against a gallows tree in an autumn wind.

LaCroix remained frozen in place, long after the smoke had cleared and the sound

of the car was no more than a memory. He had failed. It was only his first attempt, but he had *still* failed. And failure was never acceptable.

The Angel stood behind him--he knew that from the warmth near his heart and the sudden singing in his ears. But he ignored those things and whirled, fangs ready, eyes flashing, and anger boiling in his brain. "You!" he accused, pointing a long white finger at the Angel. "*You* did this! It was perfect, but you broke the pact. You interfered."

The Angel's face remained unmoved. "Nothing was done--"

But LaCroix was in no mood to listen. His anger fueled his hunger. He sprang at the Angel, his nails sharp, his vision clouded by red. The warmth of the Angel's skin was beneath his fingers. He pulled aside the collar of the coat and sunk his fangs deep into that perfect, marble neck, ignoring the splay of electricity that traveled the length of his body, his hands, his face, his fangs--wherever he touched the Angel.

The liquid, when it touched his lips and throat, was fire--red and burning. Choking, he half-stumbled and was half-pushed backward by the Angel. He caught a glimpse of the Angel's face and had never seen such a look of shock and violation. One hand rested on its neck, the other was held outward from it, frozen in the act of pushing him away.

LaCroix fell to his knees in the snow, bent double as the taste of angel continued to burn like fire inside of him. The pain was worse than fire, worse any of the wounds Nicholas had caused. And then he felt a warmth upon him, an uncomfortable warmth, like the first rays of the sun. He forced himself to look up--

The Angel floated above him, dressed in a robe so white, its brilliance danced and sparkled across his vision until he thought he might have been blind, but that he still saw this vision. And what a vision it was! If he had thought the Angel perfection before, it was but a pale imitation of what he saw now. The face and skin glowed from within with a pure and vibrant light, the eyes held only the barest vestige of blue, as white as the robe and whiter still. The lips held firm in a thin, disapproving ruby line of righteous indignation. The hands seemed long and large enough to hold the world and toss it among the stars. Wings rose behind it in clouds of feathers, glorious to behold, with the strength of the four winds at their command.

The light began to burn him. Not fiercely, but enough, so that he felt the heat from inside. His coat, his skin, began to smoke.

And he didn't care. He made no movement, no motion, knowing that he was being unmade and not able to bring himself to do anything about it. It was ecstasy he felt, for the length and breadth of his body, in every fiber of which he was constructed and every memory or feeling or thought that made him what he was. Music such as he had never heard filled his ears and his heart and his mind. He stretched out his arms, reaching for it--

And then the lips trembled, parted. The eyes turned blue and the light faded. The Angel stood on the ground, clothed as before, and now its face was filled with emotion. The sadness was so profound that LaCroix felt his own eyes filling with tears as the Angel looked at him. Then it thrust its hands toward heaven, threw back its head, and screamed, falling to its knees in the snow.

That scream echoed in his ears, remaining, as did the tears on his cheeks, for the long minutes after the Angel disappeared. LaCroix could not move and did not wish to, the horror of that sound burrowing into his brain, drowning out the music that had filled him, so briefly, with intense joy. It was to have been shown heaven and then cast from it again, into the deepest of darknesses.

But then, that had been the beginning of his journey.

It was cold enough so that the very tears froze to his face. He brushed them away, settling his demeanor, bringing equilibrium to himself again. He rose from the snow and took stock of himself, realizing that he had not burned or, if so, had been healed again. Even the scar on his face was gone now. The coming months of restoring strength had been by-passed in a second. He felt more powerful than he had ever felt before.

Which meant . . . that he was strong enough to repay those debts that had been thrust upon him. It was time that Nicholas learned the true fate of those who defied him.

Of course, he had yet to perform an evil deed. No matter what might come of the Angel, their bargain still stood. And he was determined to win. But what more evil deed could one pursue than revenge, the killing of one's own blood?

Smiling, LaCroix rose in the air, taking to the sky and wind, cloaking himself in the dark mystery of night. He cast his senses outward, seeking the bonds that tied him to Nicholas. At one point his attention passed over Janette--he laughed, imagining her gasp. He would leave her to wonder for a while longer if the episode was merely a memory, or presaged his return. It would be good to leave her uncertain, for a change.

But Nicholas--he frowned, realizing that Nicholas had unlearned so many of his lessons. His mind was open, like a beacon, concerned with mortal matters. So absorbed was he in his business, that LaCroix had no fear of being sensed by his former pupil. He let that mind guide him to a rooftop. Landing, he walked to the edge, and looked over the concrete abutment.

Nicholas stood four stories beneath him, on the street. He paced back and forth beneath a street light. He was waiting for some mortal, information about some crime that would help him to save a life. That and only that filled his mind this Christmas Eve--the preservation of a mortal he did not know.

Yes, Nicholas had much to answer for--not only turning his hand against his master, but his mind and heart as well.

Standing there, with the cold breeze whipping around him, LaCroix studied the distance and the speed of the wind. With a single javelin throw, he could easily pierce his student's heart with the wooden shaft, then take his head and scatter his ashes before Nicholas could do more than blink. It would be a clean ending--far better than his treachery deserved--but it would be final. There would be no way back.

"If that is what you believe," said a soft voice from behind him.

LaCroix spun on his heels, defensive, surprised at the Angel's sudden appearance. But the Angel made no move to attack him. Instead, it stood there, the face a study

of marble composure, the hands clasped together in serene confidence. But . . . were the fingers intertwined more tightly than before? And were those flecks of angel blood--or whatever it was that ran through angel hearts--on the collar of the brown coat?

He frowned and turned away. "Are you here to interfere again?"

"I did not interfere," said the Angel's voice, which was, if anything, more studiously toneless than before. "It was your own heart that prompted you to a good deed, not any pressure of my own."

LaCroix glanced below, to the street. "And you won't stop me from this? If I should destroy him--?"

"Your friend?"

The word struck his heart like no other could. His fingers gripped the edge of the concrete wall, gouging the solid stone. "A friend does not betray another."

"A friend may defend himself, if he is pushed too far." The Angel stood beside him and followed his gaze. "You have made him. And you believe you have the power to unmake him."

"I do," said LaCroix, firmly. He glared at the Angel, daring it to speak.

"That is not for me to say." The Angel continued to stare below. "He has a noble heart, one of the best of your kind. It is his nature. And had you not pushed him so, he would not have harmed you."

"He chose a mortal over *me. Me*! His master!"

"For jealousy, you would destroy him? I would have thought you above such petty motives, Master LaCroix."

The smallest of smiles flitted across the Angel's lips. Inwardly, LaCroix burned. "For disobedience. For murder. For insubordination."

"Mortal sins, all. But neither of you are mortal." The Angel bowed its head and closed its eyes briefly. When they opened, it fixed its gaze on LaCroix. "And do you know how his heart burns, for what he has done? He equates himself with Brutus. Or Judas. Though he knows he acted in defense of another, there is still torment within him."

"Brutus was an intellectual idiot--he had no concept of the necessity of action," sneered LaCroix. "And Judas was a greedy coward. One of Nicholas could match ten of each of them, easily."

"Pride is also a sin," warned the Angel, softly.

"Only if it is without basis. And you, who can see into mortal and immortal hearts, cannot tell me that I should not be proud in counting that one among my own."

The Angel's head dipped slightly--the point had been acknowledged. Then it walked away from the edge of the roof, turning its back toward him. "The chimes of

mid-night shall strike soon, Master LaCroix. If you are to destroy him, it must be now."

Looking over the edge of the rooftop, at Nicholas standing lonely vigil below, something in LaCroix went very still. This was not a duel between men, or equals, or even master and pupil. This was an assassination. Nicholas deserved better than that. He turned to tell the Angel so.

"Will you not destroy him? Or are you lacking a weapon?" The Angel walked over to a pile of long wooden poles on the roof and lifted one. It broke easily in the Angel's hand, suddenly becoming a spear. The Angel walked toward LaCroix and held the spear across its outstretched hands. "Here is the means of your revenge. You cannot claim now that I have done anything against you. I have given you a weapon. You must do the rest."

LaCroix looked to the street again. Nicholas was unaware of the danger he was in, although his senses should have been screaming like war sirens. It would serve the fool right to be speared.

He tried to imagine Nicholas' face, as the wooden shaft pierced his heart and found that the thought unsettled him. Shaking his head, LaCroix spat blood to the floor of the roof, in disgust. "No. Not like this. I want to see his face, when he finds out that he failed to destroy me. I want to see those he loves burn before his eyes. I want him to know the pain that I have endured these past months, these past centuries, at his hands--"

Again, the Angel stood beside him. "There is no time. If you are to win, you must strike now." The Angel hefted the spear with a practiced hand and LaCroix's eyes widened in appreciation, as he realized the hands of the artist had skill in the arts of war, as well as music. "Shall I do it for you? If you are afraid that you might wound him only, cause him undue suffering, I can assure you a clean kill if you place my hand over yours. There would only be the head to remove, the ashes to scatter, and you would be done."

That white hand raised the shaft on high.

"No!" cried LaCroix. He reached for the weapon, catching the wood before it could fly. The Angel released its grip and stepped back. LaCroix took the shaft and broke it over his knee, then stood very still.

Nicholas had noticed them. His mind quested, searched--and LaCroix dropped every shield in place, hiding from his pupil. Not now. He could not face Nicholas *now*.

And then the questing stopped and Nicholas was consumed with mortal thoughts again.

"You cannot destroy him," said the Angel. "You cannot unmake this, which you have made."

Tossing the pieces of the spear at the Angel's feet, LaCroix spat, "I *will* not. There *is* a difference."

"Of semantics."

"I have done it before."

"When the making was hurried or a lark." The Angel's eyes grew hooded. "You have done so with many in the past, Master LaCroix. But this one was made with a purpose."

"A purpose," sneered LaCroix. His wrapped himself in his contempt and took a step toward the edge of the roof, then stopped himself. "I was bored."

"You were lonely."

His heart froze at the sound of the truth, for even he could not escape such things, when spoken by angels. "I had Janette."

"You wanted a friend."

The second arrow sang home as well. He stared into the darkness, groping for some plausible denial. "I wanted a toy. Something to mold, then discard when I grew tired of it."

"You wanted a son."

To that third, he could not reply. He could only stand and stare at the stars, knowing that heaven had beaten him. "I beg you," he whispered, "go no further--"

But the Angel continued. And his heart pounded with the cadence of the words. "You had known the darkness for too long even then. You are clever, Master LaCroix, but even you had not grasped the length of forever. You began to realize the sameness of the nights, the years, the decades, the centuries. And that the end, for the end would have to come eventually, would be long in coming. A man who lives with death grows used to its presence and accepts the end with grace, or fights valiantly to the last for one more breath. That is fitting--their lives are so short."

He felt a warmth spread through him, as the Angel's hand fell on his shoulder. "Your candles burn long. And it is the waiting that is the hardest. Many of your kind snuff the flame long before the wick has ended, because they cannot endure the waiting. It is a lonely vigil . . . without others. They are a distraction, give a purpose to existence. And when the end comes, they will stand beside you. You will not face it alone."

A second hand fell on his other shoulder. "You were not wrong in the choice of him, but in your methods. You bully and try to break him to your hand. If you discard the mantle of master, you will find a friend. And you will have someone to stand with you when the darkness comes to claim you both."

In the distance, a church bell began to ring. LaCroix closed his eyes, letting the beauty of the sound overwhelm him. That, and the warmth of the angel's hands on his shoulders, surrounded him in a cloud of peace and perfect tranquility that he had never known before.

"You have lost your challenge," said the Angel. "It is over."

"No." Slipping from beneath the Angel's hands, he whirled. His mind was cloudy, but he fought his way out of the Angel's web of words, discarding them without a second

thought. "I have won."

The Angel smiled, with grace. "Master LaCroix, the woman lived. And your friend still stands in the street below. The church bells have struck the hour--"

He stalked toward the Angel, fists clenched. "I have made an angel scream. I have driven one of the heavenly host to anger . . . and spiteful revenge. When I attacked you, you struck back at me . . . and you *wanted* to destroy me. I was in your charge and you let me *burn*."

Not a muscle moved on the face of the Angel, but the blue eyes were dull, the sparkle was gone. "I stopped. And you were healed."

"Purity in thought *and* deed," said LaCroix archly. He crossed his arms and planted his feet. "Tell me, Sir Angel, that I did *not* win."

The Angel turned away. For the second time that night, LaCroix felt a wave of sorrow rush outward, but this time he was prepared for it. Steeling his heart, he stood against it. And when the Angel spoke, it was the sound of heaven weeping.

"You have won," it said. "And you may have what you ask. But--oh!" When it turned, there were tears in its eyes. It dropped to its knees before him, hands together as if in prayer. Those blue eyes met and held his. "Master LaCroix, I beseech you, do not ask this of me. Do not take from yourself what comfort you may have. Forever is longer than even you might know. Do not do this thing."

LaCroix leaned down and met the Angel's eyes. Triumph swelled his heart and he rejoiced to see heaven on its knees before him. "I have won. And I demand satisfaction. Leave me, Angel. Forever."

Tears sparkled on the marble cheeks as the Angel rose to its feet. Its eyes were filled with unending sorrow as it met his gaze one last time. "As you wish, Master LaCroix. As you wish. And I pray you may never need the comfort of heaven."

There was no smoke or magic--the Angel simply disappeared. LaCroix stumbled, falling to one knee on the snow covered rooftop, hands clutching at his heart. For where there had been what he thought was a tiny bit of warmth, there was now a chasm so wide and so deep that it could never be filled. A cold and empty wind whistled through the silence.

And silent it was. Because the music--even that--had left him, with the Angel's passing.

It was so still he could hear the impact of the snow as it began to fall, joining and melding with the whiteness that seemed to cover everything. His vision cleared after a moment--those were not tears, but melting snow--and he brushed the wetness away. Rising to his feet, he stalked to the edge of the rooftop and peered down.

Nicholas was no longer there. LaCroix could sense him in the distance, could track him if needed--

But . . . no. Now was not the time. He would settle with Nicholas later. As he had in the past. As they would in the future. This time, he would not let it get out of hand. He would take his time--for time enough he had--and do the thing right. Nicholas

would be his. He would win. He always won.

When he rose into the night sky, he blamed the emptiness inside on the fact that he had not fed. This night, there would be no living prey. He would turn to the storage chest for nourishment. He would play his violin until dawn. And he would wait in dread for his dreams, which would be dark and uneven--

And without music.

Forever.

The End

Coin of the Realm

by Susan M. Garrett

The Raven was nearly empty, but it was still early in the evening. Nick nodded at the regulars in passing, most of whom gave him a wide berth. Some treated him that way out of respect, others out of fear, and others because he was known to be an old companion of the club's owner.

There were times when the quiet deference was annoying. Right now, he didn't much care. It was Christmas, after all, or near enough. It was the time when all men, mortal or not, should treat one another with civility and gentle hospitality. Unfortunately, reality didn't often conform to the ideal, which was why he was on duty this evening and the next, which would be Christmas Eve, and even Christmas Day itself.

Janette, as usual, had seated herself at the bar. She raised her glass to him as he entered, then leaned forward so that he could kiss her cheek. He did so, then moved behind her, resting his arm on the side of the bar. "Checking on our license, Officer Knight?" she asked. "I promise you, I'm well over the drinking age."

"And getting pretty close to your limit." Touching her chin, he tilted back her head and looked in her eyes, seeing there a red haze from the blood that she drank and smelling the scent of alcohol, from the wine she used to cut it. "Janette, it's barely after sunset."

She sniffed, an extravagant gesture. "If you're here to chide me, you can leave now."

"I'm concerned for you, that's all."

The hard look in her eyes softened and she leaned her head back against his chest. "I know. And you needn't be. It's only the season, after all."

"Yes. I know." He placed a hand on her bare shoulder, then kissed the top of her head. "Which is one of the reasons I stopped by. Your gift arrived today."

Her head twisted around and, in response, he reluctantly pushed back the sleeve of his leather jacket and his shirt to show her his wrist.

"I had to be careful. I know how the city feels about civil servants receiving expensive gifts. We wouldn't want them to think that one of their *cops* was on the take." Janette examined the watch, her fingers tracing the line of the band around his wrist. Then she looked up at him, frowning. "The calendar is only accurate to the year 3000," she complained.

"Hopefully, I won't need it that long."

"Spoilsport." She turned back to her drink.

Nick leaned over her shoulder and whispered in her ear, "But I love it anyway. Thank you."

Janette turned her head, her eyes meeting his. "You're welcome." She glanced over the clientele and took another sip from her glass. "I suppose I should thank you for that new birth certificate. Although you could have made me a *little* younger--"

"Infants are not licensed to own bars in the city of Toronto," he reminded. Slipping to her other side, he sat down on the stool beside her. "I left a message for you--that I'd be busy tomorrow night."

Her eyes fixed upon his instantly. "Yes. *Busy*."

"On duty." He said the words slowly, to let her understand that this former engagement was professional.

Her lips twisted in a sneer. "Oh, yes. The *cop*."

It never ceased to amaze him how much derision she could apply to the pronunciation of so small a word. Catching her wrist, he stopped her from raising the glass to her lips. "Janette, I came here for our toast. Since I'll miss it tomorrow night?"

Her hand stopped in mid-motion and she met his eyes again. "How thoughtful. Will you do the honors?"

Leaving the stool, he moved behind the bar. The bottle was ready, as always, the red velvet ribbon on its neck. He lifted it, staring through the brown glass at the red contents that swirled inside. How many years ago had it begun . . . ?

Copenhagen was gay at Christmastide. Nicholas held the door open as Janette stepped from the house they had rented, then was forced to release it as the night wind swept his top hat from his head. She laughed as he stumbled after it in the snow and he clowned a bit, wanting to hear more of her laughter. She laughed so seldom any more.

"Merriment?" asked LaCroix, exiting behind her. Smiling, he offered Janette his arm. She slipped her hand through the opening, then returned her delicate fingers to her fur ruff.

Finished with his clowning, Nicholas stood still, admiring the sight of them as they waited for the carriage. The candle lamps shown brightly off the black satin and beaver of LaCroix's coat and hat. And even Janette had foregone her favorite black for a more festive dress, the pattern of which he could spot beneath the hem of her coat. They were all of a fashion, having just arrived from Berlin. Copenhagen society had not seen their like in some time.

"Are you certain?" asked Nicholas, brushing the snow from his hat and setting it in place again. When he was close enough, Janette reached over to adjust his tie beneath his coat.

"We are not so far from civilization that gold and florins are not highly prized," promised LaCroix. He lifted the cane in his hand and gestured toward the carriage that approached down the cobble-stoned street. "There, our carriage. These Danish are most efficient. Commendable, don't you think, Nicholas."

And it was a city unlike others they had passed through over the years. The rumors of the cleanliness of Copenhagen were true. Although Nicholas had not and never would witness the legendary women who whitewashed their porch steps with the rising sun, he saw the results each night. He could only imagine what a bustle the city was during the day--how the festive holiday greens and decorations would look in the sunshine, the smart suits and dresses that paraded through the gold district that had drawn LaCroix, the calls of the vendors who plied their trade from carts, wrapping their goods in fresh, brown paper and leaving no trace of their presence after dusk.

Even now, he tipped his hat to the watch, who stepped smartly through the street. Their footsteps echoed from the pavement in the near silence. Church bells rang in the distance, accompanying the heady melody of a dancing tune from a tavern down the way. Beyond that he heard the call of a match seller, and yet another voice offering mistletoe. The salt of the nearby sea was on the air, hinted with the powerful scent of fresh cut evergreens that seemed to be all around them.

"Nicholas?"

LaCroix was standing by the carriage, the door open and Janette already inside. Nodding, Nicholas took his place beside her inside the box, and LaCroix closed the door behind him. It was only seconds later that LaCroix opened the other door and slipped into the carriage, sitting on the seat across from them. He tapped the roof of the carriage with the tip of his cane and the box lurched awkwardly. The sound of the horses hooves echoed on the stone road.

Janette sighed, then suddenly leaned forward. "LaCroix, what is that? A gift for me?"

For the first time, Nicholas noticed the wicker basket that sat beside LaCroix. "Or your needlework," he jested, laughing at the frown she gave him. She so hated to work a fine needle, although after centuries of practice her work was the most delicate to be found in the world.

"I doubt our Janette plans to become a seamstress anytime soon," commented LaCroix, as he opened one side of the wicker hamper. "Although with what she spends on clothes, we might well be forced to resort to menial jobs ourselves, Nicholas, if we're to keep her in fine silk and satin."

Janette crossed her arms and turned her face to the window. "I will refuse to speak with either of you for the rest of the evening, unless you cease jesting at my expense."

"It's Christmastide," whispered Nicholas, leaning close to her ear and planting a kiss on the lobe. "Be careful or you might find your wooden clogs filled with switches."

"Mind what you find when you put on *your* boots tomorrow evening," warned Janette. But when he kissed her ear again, she turned and smiled at him.

"That's right, children, play nice. Or Sanct Herr Nicholass will send Black Pete after

you with his birch rod. And don't think you'll get off lightly, despite your name, Nicholas." Leaning forward, LaCroix ran his finger along Janette's cheek. "And if you pout, dear Janette, how can you make the toast? It's your turn this year, I think."

Janette sat up straight, clasping her hands together. "Oh, have you brought it with you?" She glanced at Nicholas, then back at LaCroix. "I thought it might be waiting for us."

LaCroix withdrew three crystal glasses from the basket, handing one to Janette, then two to Nicholas. A bottle, the neck of which held a red velvet ribbon, followed. "Even in such enlightened times, we must be careful when we toast with this vintage. I think I shall do the honors, Nicholas, as your hands are full--"

Nicholas watched the bottle hungrily as LaCroix withdrew the cork using his fingernails. A second later and he poured the thick red liquid into each glass, timing the flow against the bumps and eddies of the carriage. "It should be cold enough, I think," said LaCroix. "And as recent as yesterday."

Janette's eyes were aglow with flecks of gold and red and Nicholas felt his own fangs slip into place, as he watched the crimson liquid fill his crystal. Most of their blood was taken warm, from live donors. In the cold climes, they were able to bottle and preserve a store for a brief time, which provided for them during the storms which sent vagrants to shelter and made finding prey difficult. To drink chilled blood was an annual event with them, a tradition of Christmastide.

LaCroix finished pouring the last glass and set the bottle aside. Nodding his head, as if in a slight bow, Nicholas presented the glass and LaCroix accepted it. They both looked to Janette, for it was her turn for the toast.

She licked her lips, eyes shining at the sight of the blood. Then she raised her glass. "To we three, to the night, to the season."

"To the blood," echoed LaCroix and Nicholas, as the glasses clinked. And they drank.

The blood was fresh and the cool taste was a change from the warm blood on which he survived, however reluctantly. Nicholas couldn't help but savor the taste on his tongue, leaning back against the soft satin pillows of the coach. Over his glass, his eyes wandered to Janette. She held both of her hands beneath the glass and had upended it, swallowing in a most unladylike manner. Rolling his eyes, he shared the joke with LaCroix, who was sipping at the edge of his glass like a gentlemen might partake of some fine liquor in a drawing room.

"A fine toast," said LaCroix, reaching for the bottle to refill Janette's glass. "Better than the last, I think."

That moment was frozen silence between them. Nicholas turned away from the two, his eyes glued to the carriage window as it passed through the small lanes into the wider, more trafficked center of town. It had been his toast last year, but he had not been present. After another falling out with LaCroix, he had tried to slip his leash again. His return, in disgrace, had not been pleasant.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and turned his head, to find LaCroix's eyes on him. "It's a new year," he said softly. "The past is best forgotten."

Still, he had been so close that time. He settled back into the carriage, sullen. A glance at Janette showed him that she had chosen to remain silent in the matter, as she so often did.

"Come, children. It's Christmas," reminded LaCroix, raising the bottle. "Nicholas, may I?"

He placed his hand over the top of his glass, then let it rest on his knee, almost forgotten. Frowning, LaCroix looked to Janette, who eagerly accepted yet another refill.

That silence occurred again. Nicholas refused to look at either of them, lost in his own remorse. He had not run far enough that time. Next time, next year, he would cross the oceans again, return to the Americas without LaCroix and Janette beside him. Would it be easier to lose himself on that wild continent? For he was most certainly lost, beside these others.

"You still have not answered my question about a present," said Janette, finally breaking the silence.

LaCroix laughed. "And what is it that you would like? A ring for your pretty finger? Or yet another new dress?" His own crystal glass emptied, LaCroix returned it to the hamper, and suddenly withdrew a small jewel box. "And how ever did that get into the basket? What could it be?"

"A dress," said Nicholas flatly.

Janette reached for the box, ignoring LaCroix's frown. But LaCroix was no longer to be diverted by her. He leaned toward Nicholas. "I have yet to find you a present, because I do not know what you most desire. What trinket would please you, Nicholas?"

"Nothing. I want nothing from you."

"Surely *something* . . . ?" pressed LaCroix.

"Something you are not prepared to give."

"Ask me, then. And I shall be the judge of whether or not I can afford to give you the gift you desire."

LaCroix's gaze was steady, the eyes sliver gray and shifting in the darkness of the carriage. Nicholas turned away, unable to meet the force of that gaze. "Have some compassion," he muttered, turning his attention to the window again. "And leave me to my own devices. For this one night, at least."

"If that is what you wish."

Behind him, he heard LaCroix settle back against the pillows of the carriage. Janette was exclaiming over her new bauble. He could hear her whispered endearments to LaCroix.

It turned his stomach. Or that could have been the chilled blood.

And then he sat upright, for the horses had stopped and the coach settled against the springs, shaking lightly. Outside stood the great hall, the courtyard blazing with torches and candles. From the window, Nicholas could see that the finest families of Copenhagen were attending this night's performance. Yet he knew he would feel no honor in sitting in the midst of such splendor, their presence having been paid by LaCroix's funds.

The footman opened the door and lowered the step from the coach. Nicholas stepped down, then offered his hand to Janette, who was forced to struggle with the full skirted fashion of the day. She made much of her ring as he took her hand and, to please her, he kissed her fingers, making her smile.

The coach door closed behind her--but LaCroix was still inside. He leaned out the window. "Enjoy the evening."

With difficulty, Janette escaped the attentions of the footman and turned, as did Nicholas. "But you were looking forward to tonight's performance!" she cried. "Where are you going?"

"I have an errand. I'll return with the coach, later." Tapping his cane against the inner roof of the carriage, he signaled the horses to start up again. Nicholas began to run beside the coach, but there was so much traffic, with more coaches arriving, that he could not keep up.

He hurried back to Janette, who was still smiling prettily. When he took her arm and started down the long walk across the courtyard, she leaned close. "You've angered him."

"I want no part of him," he'd answered stiffly, pasting a smile on his face, nodding to casual business acquaintances as he caught sight of them.

"But we *are* part of him. And *he* is part of us." When he looked down at her, she was staring straight ahead. And her eyes, however pleasant her smile, were frightened. "Do not press him, Nicola," she warned. "One day you will go too far. It will be you or LaCroix." She dared a glance up at him. "I do not think we could survive without LaCroix."

Saying that, Janette looked away, and did not speak to him again until the last of the evening's applause echoed from the ceiling of the great hall.

"Nicola?"

Her voice stirred him from his reverie. He found he'd twisted the cork from the bottle with his nails, as LaCroix had always done. Lifting two glasses to the counter, he poured, then sniffed the bottle.

"Not your preferred vintage," she apologized, abandoning her other glass on the counter and slipping from her stool. "But I assumed you might make an exception this night."

"For you. Yes." He picked up the glass, the red color dark and thick, uncut by alcohol. "We haven't done this for some time."

"And it's your turn to toast." She picked up the glass and met his eyes.

Nick paused, staring at the brilliant red of the blood, that shone brightly even in the darkness of the Raven. "To we . . . two. To the night. To the season."

"To the blood," answered Janette.

The clink of the two glasses sounded hollow to him. Still, he drained his in one gulp and set the glass aside. Human blood still had a sweet tint and it made his heart sing, after so many months of subsisting on cow blood alone. He looked to Janette and saw her frowning, toying with the ring on her finger, the ring that LaCroix had given her that night in Copenhagen. He'd not realized she still had it. "Janette--"

She hadn't tasted her glass, but stared at it, as if expecting it to change shape or color. "I don't blame you for destroying him."

Nick closed his eyes for a moment, his fist clenching of its own accord. "If he would have let me go--let me alone. He pushed and pushed. It had been so long, I thought he'd finally given up."

"He could be *so* cruel." When he opened his eyes, he saw that Janette still had not tasted the blood in her glass. "And yet . . . he made us." Her finger traced the crystal rim absently. "I never thought I would miss him."

Nick reached across the bar to take her hand. "I'm still here."

"Yes. But so was he. And he is gone." She looked up at him, her dark eyes shining. "And you will go, Nicola. And I will be alone." Tightening her grip on his hand, she downed the glass, then threw it against the back wall of the bar. "Which is why you must not be rude to me when I drink too much."

Leaving the bar, he reached her side and kissed her on the forehead. "Merry Christmas, Janette."

But she placed her hand on his cheek holding his face inches from hers. "Merry Christmas, Nicola--"

"Detective Knight?"

He looked up at the voice, ignoring Janette's exasperated sigh. The bartender waved a phone receiver at him, from the far end of the bar. Nick looked at Janette and she pointed behind them. "There's a phone back there."

"Thanks." Standing on the rungs of the stool, Nick reached over to the back side of the bar and picked up a receiver. "Knight here."

"Nick! Geez, partner, do you know how hard you are to track down?"

Closing his eyes, Nick rested his hand against his forehead. "What is it, Schanke? Has Toronto declared war on Chicago?"

"They're calling everyone in early. There's a probable kidnapping at the mid-town mall, a two year old kid. Stonetree wants you to head there. Kelly's on the scene--she'll give you the details." He could almost imagine Schanke shaking his

head. "Can you believe the sickos in this world? Imagine, taking a kid the day before Christmas Eve?"

"That's why we're employed, Schank. Tell Stonetree I'm on my way." He hung up the phone, then straightened.

"I know--you have to go."

Nick took her hand and kissed the knuckles. "Don't drink too much."

In response, she waved her glass at him. "*Joyeux Noel,* Nicola. To we two. . . for now."

* * *

The mall was awash with the colors and sounds of the season. Speakers blared an unending cacophony of muzac Christmas carols, but even that noise wasn't enough to drown out the drone of the shoulder-to-shoulder shoppers. Evergreen, spun sugar, hot buttered popcorn, and a thousand other scents blurred together and permeated the length and breadth of the mall. Voices argued or laughed, children screamed and wailed and pleaded, and feet trampled wearily across one level, then another.

It was madness. And each and every part of it would make his job harder, if not completely impossible.

"Nick!"

Natalie was struggling through the crowd toward him, a ski cap perched tenuously on her disheveled hair, her coat hanging open, the scarf askew and threatening to strangle her. But there was a brightness in her eyes and he smiled at the sight of her.

It was only a matter of sheer physical effort that brought her near enough for him to grab her arm and remove her from the herd of shoppers traveling past. "I thought you were done shopping," he chided.

"So did I." Natalie tried to catch her breath, leaning on his arm. Two shopping bags were slung over her shoulder and she held another, smaller bag in her hand. She grinned impishly up at him. "Oh, I opened my present."

Putting on a mock frown, he shook his finger at her. "Now, you're supposed to wait for Christmas--"

"So don't give it to me early. And I love them, all of them."

Smiling shyly, he shrugged his shoulders and looked off into the crowd. "Well, I didn't know what color you wanted. And since you practically live in them . . ."

"One sweatshirt would have been enough. Really. But, Nick, one of every color they had? I can start my own exercise club. And now I've gotta get more hangers--"

"I'll remember for next year," he promised, holding up his hand, palm outward.

"You'd better." Planting a quick kiss on his cheek, she whispered, "Thanks."

The crowd chose that moment to impinge upon their personal space, pushing them together. Nick found himself staring into those large, mortal eyes, heard her heartbeat throbbing even beneath the layers of winter clothing, and, for a moment, forgot where he was or why he was there. There was only Natalie, with the warm eyes, bright smile, and inviting lips.

Then they were jostled from the other side, broken apart by the hustle and bustle of the insistent shoppers. Nick looked up and away, pretending the moment had never happened. It was better that way, easier if they just remained friends.

"You're the last person I'd expect to see in this madness," commented Natalie, after clearing her throat. "I thought you did most of your shopping mail order."

"I do. It's business." Again, he looked up into the mall, but the signs were obscured by sale banners and holiday decorations. "You wouldn't happen to know where they keep the security office in here?"

"Why? Are you on shoplifting detail?" she teased.

"We might have a kidnapping on our hands. A two-year old."

Her smile fled. Lips drawn into a tight line, she nodded, then looped her arm through his. "Hang on--I'll get you there. I think it's on the second level."

It took them almost ten minutes to brave the cresting tide of shoppers and reach the security office. One of the mall security guards was exiting as they approached. Reaching in his pocket, Nick withdrew his badge with one hand and with expertise born of practice, flipped it open for the guard's inspection.

There was no pause on the guard's part--he held open the frosted glass door, standing to one side as they passed through. The office was small, the plain white walls decorated with framed pictures, photographs, and service awards, as well as posters of known shoplifters. A bank of surveillance equipment, including three monitors, was manned by two mall security guards. There were two desks and a small waiting area with a couch, table and lamp. A hallways led away, to distant doors and other noises.

Three uniformed officers were listening to a woman who was wearing a tan skirt and jacket. Seeing Nick, she waved him forward, then the officers dispersed, all heading for the door.

"Glad you're here," said the woman. "Stonetree said he'd call in everyone he could get at short notice."

"Natalie Lambert, Detective Kelly Ross." Nick stepped back as the women shook hands. "Kelly, Nat's the County Coroner."

"Here strictly as a civilian and mall guide," said Natalie quickly, as Ross' blue eyes widened. "Nick told me what was up and I thought I'd lend a hand."

Ross smiled and gestured down the corridor that led out of the small office. "How's your bedside manner with the living?"

Natalie stiffened slightly, her eyes followed Kelly's gesture. "Let me guess, the

mother?"

"In one. Lucy Reese. I think I've gotten all I can out of her. She's not hysterical--yet."

Dropping her packages behind a desk, Natalie reached up to touch Nick's arm. "I'll see what I can do. Call me if you need anything."

"Thanks." Seating himself on the edge of a brightly patterned sofa, Nick looked up at her. "What have you got?"

"Less than I'd like." Ross picked up a notebook from the desk and flipped it open. "She took the kid to see Santa. They got off line, she turned around and the kid was gone. No one saw anything, of course. And with the traffic in this mall, there was no way to track down witnesses by the time we arrived. I've got someone talking to Santa and his elves right now." Frowning, she handed him a photograph from the notebook. "The only good thing about it is we've got a recent picture *and* a visual on what the kid's wearing."

The picture could have been of any child--brown hair, dark eyes, dressed in an orange and blue snowsuit. Completely average, down to the kid crying on Santa's lap. But this child was missing.

"I've called in the description. We've got it on the wire. And the mall photo lab's got dupes of this picture running. We should have them in another--" she glanced up at the wall clock behind her, "fifteen minutes." Ross shook her head slightly. "We got the call an hour ago. The kid's been gone for ninety minutes."

Nick met her gaze evenly, knowing the implications of that statement. Most non-parental abduction cases without a solid lead in the first two hours after the disappearance ended up with a corpse or . . . the child seemed to disappear from the face of the earth. "What about the parents?"

Her eyes dropped to the pad again and she flipped a sheet of paper aside. "Like I said, I got what I could from the mother. No real problems in the marriage, no custody issues, no strangers hanging around, everything's cool with the relatives. The mother was laid-off from her job at a cannery five months ago. We're trying to get word to the father--he does night trucking from the airport." Flipping the notebook shut, she sighed. "They're subsistence level, if that."

"So ransom isn't an option."

Ross looked away. "Somebody just took the kid. And that's the worst kind of case to have. Why do people do shit like this? Christ, Nick, it's Christmas!"

Nick saw the tightness in her shoulders, the tension in her eyes, and wished there was something he could do. He'd seen countless children die through the centuries--in plague, in war, in helpless squalor--yet he could offer her no answer. All they could do was their job--keep their attention on the details and their options open. "Is the station running a list of possibles?"

"All sexual offenders or known pedophiles recently released or in the area. No recent snatch attempts at the local hospitals or playgrounds."

"At least *that's* something."

Ross shrugged, but there was a half-smile on her face. Touching his arm, she gestured toward the surveillance equipment. "How about a video?"

"You buying the popcorn?"

The look she gave him was one of mock-disgust. "That's all you night-shift guys ever think about--food."

Nick followed her over to the console. "Can I assume that means you've worked with Schanke recently?"

An amused snort was his only answer. Arms crossed, he stood to one side and waited.

"Run it," said Ross, to one of the security guards. She pointed toward the far monitor, but stood where she was, watching another display. "You'll get the better shots there. The whole thing's less than a minute long."

The picture appeared on the blank screen, shuddering and rolling, then settling in place. "The left side's the exit from 'Santa's Workshop.' Just past the sign on the right is the north side mall entrance wing."

"Got it." Nick watched the picture, hoping his extra-acute vision could catch some detail that even Ross' quick eyes would miss. The film was in black and white, he noted, which would give them better resolution in the blow-ups.

People moved to and fro in jerky fashion on the film. Children and adults, casual shoppers, and even a security guard passed beneath the eye of the camera. Nick leaned forward as the child in the photo, holding his mother's hand, wandered into view. They moved upward, out of frame. A second later, the child was back, alone. Seemingly confused, it moved toward the sign that obstructed the view of the north mall wing entrance.

"There!" cried Ross. "Freeze it."

The image froze in place. Ross walked over to stand beside him. "That's the best we can do."

Nick stared at the image--the standing sign obscured most of the camera's view. The child's hand was upward, being held by the left hand of an adult. From the pants and the boots visible beneath the lower portion of the sale sign, and the shoulder that he could see beyond a bit of the sign, he would guess the kidnapper to be male. "Six foot, maybe taller," he muttered under his breath, already creating a profile. "Caucasian. No rings on the left hand--"

A shudder went through him. He backed up a step from the monitor, staring.

No. It couldn't be.

Not . . . LaCroix.

He started at the touch on his shoulder and stared at Ross a second. "What?" she asked. Her attention moved to the monitor, as she tried to spot what had stopped him cold.

"Nothing," he said, offering her a sheepish smile. "Just trying to get some perspective." Swallowing, he placed his hands on either side of the monitor and leaned closer, Ross beside him. "Is there any more?"

"That's the best shot." Turning to the guard, she said, "Let it run, Neill."

She was right--the picture never got clearer or closer than that one shot and the sale sign cut out anything that could be of use. As the tape cut to black, he met Ross' eyes. "Run it again," he ordered.

Shrugging, she went back to the console and spoke in low tones with the security guard. But Nick kept his attention on the black screen. The freeze frame had been captured in his mind. As if it were a mental photograph, he viewed it from all angles, looking for something, anything, to disprove that one brief flash of recognition--the color of the hair, the bend of a finger, the stance and balance of the boots . . . it was all too familiar.

Nor would it be out of character. There was one Christmas that still haunted his memory, how his careless, sullen reply had led to spilled blood.

LaCroix had slipped into his seat beside Janette during the second half of the symphony. Nicholas kept his gaze to the stage and tried to keep his fidgeting to a minimum. The music bored him this night, as did the various politicians and society matrons that he'd been forced to charm during intermission. There would only be the ride back in the carriage and then he'd be left to brood on his own

The audience rose in ovation, applauding. Janette leaned down, slapping his shoulder with her fan, then applauded as well, casting him a disgusted look as he struggled to his feet. LaCroix, thankfully, didn't look askance and was pretending as if nothing had happened. Nicholas clapped all the louder, again catching a reproving glance from Janette. Still, he followed her dutifully from the great hall and helped her into her coat at the cloakroom. He received no thanks for his pains--in fact, she grabbed her ruff from his hands and tied her bonnet on so quickly that it was slightly askew.

The carriage waited for them, as did the carriages of the other patrons. Janette walked ahead, escorted by LaCroix and Nicholas continued to follow. This time it was he who took the small seat on the far side of the coach, a glare from Janette letting him know in no uncertain terms that to sit beside her would be to endanger his immortal existence.

It was only after the horses began to move and the coach rocked on its way that she turned her dark eyes on him again. "Nicola, I have never been *so* embarrassed! You were rude--"

Too tired, too annoyed to fight any longer, he simply turned away, preparing to endure what could not be stopped. But LaCroix leaned forward and took Janette's hand. "Now, let's not have this," he warned, in a voice of silk lined with steel. "You must forgive Nicholas. After all, he has a right to sulk. I gave you your present before we went inside and he did not receive his. It was a thoughtless oversight on my part. If anyone has been rude, it is I."

Trying not to show his surprise, Nicholas glanced at Janette, but her blank

expression told him that she was as baffled as he at the turn of events. "You have a present for Nicola?" she asked, an eyebrow arching. "Here?"

"Not here," countered LaCroix, his smile secretive. Indicating the window with a gloved hand, he added, "We'll arrive presently."

Nicholas stared at him, willing his master's gaze to meet his own, but LaCroix sat quietly, his smile still hiding his secret. "I told you," he said quietly. "I want nothing from you."

"You asked for a show of compassion. And that you will have." Finally, LaCroix looked at him, his smile twisting into a sneer. "It is Christmastide, after all."

The rest of the carriage ride was consumed with talk of the performance they had witnessed. LaCroix talked Janette through the half he had missed like a drill sergeant, asking about instruments, going back to clear up minor points, correcting her pronunciation of terminology like a school master. Thankfully, Nicholas was spared the exercise. Some time before LaCroix had dismissed his talent for music appreciation as barely adequate, concentrating instead on the more promising pupil.

It was only as the carriage drew near their residence that he heard the music that interested him the most--the tavern tunes that escaped even through the shutters and doors battened against the snow. He found himself leaning against the carriage window to better hear as they passed, then found LaCroix beside him.

"There's life in that music," said LaCroix. "No grandeur . . . but raw, untamed passion."

Nicholas leaned back inside the carriage, assuming a pose of disinterest. "Too common, is it not?" he asked, tugging to loosen his tie.

LaCroix remained at the window. "There will be sport, there. Blue blood runs too thin. I think we might indulge in the common now and then." Half-turning, he lifted the cane from the seat beside him and tapped on the hatch in the carriage.

It opened and the coachman glanced down. "Sir?"

"Stop at the tavern," commanded LaCroix.

The hatch in the roof of the ceiling closed. The carriage jerked slightly to the left and Nicholas slipped on the satin coverings, bumping his shoulder against the wall. Janette smiled sharply, still glaring at him beneath her half-closed eyelids.

Pretending not to notice, he waited until the carriage slowed, then opened the door and leaped to the ground. As the others disembarked, he pulled the satin tie from his neck, dropped it into the gutter, and started for the tavern door.

That's when they heard the scream.

Nicholas glanced back, but LaCroix was helping Janette from the carriage. He ran in the direction of the cry, but was beaten to the scene by a night watchman. Indeed, by the time he arrived at the alley not more than a stone's throw from their residence, there was already a small crowd.

He forced his way through them, to the center. A night watchman was kneeling in the snow, beside the body of a child. Because of the ragged cap and the dirty, patched apron, he relegated her to the group of homeless urchins that the work houses sold out to match and poesy concessions. A tray lay in the snow beside her, neatly placed. Beside this were blackened wooden matches, a few strays alone and then all in a mass, together.

The night watchman bowed his head and looked back at the crowd. "She's frozen to death, poor thing. Does anyone know her bondsman?"

As others came forward, trying to identify the young girl, Nicholas rose to his feet and stumbled back a pace or two. He knew the child had not frozen. He could see the two pinholes of red on her neck. He knew how the child had died.

Blindly, he turned and fought his way out, away from the body in the snow. But LaCroix stood in his way, Janette beside him.

"Nicola, what has happened?" she asked. When he didn't answer, Janette made a sound of impatience and, lifting her skirts from the wet drifts, she pushed past him roughly and went to see for herself.

Nicholas stared after her, then turned his gaze back to LaCroix.

There was no pretense of innocence. Wearing a thin smile, LaCroix tipped his hat. "Merry Christmas, Nicholas. I hope you like your gift."

Nick turned away from the monitor, shaking his head. No, LaCroix had been destroyed. It could *not* be LaCroix.

The office door was opened, the glass rattling in the frame as it slammed against the outer wall. A man entered--hair disheveled, coat open--accompanied by a security guard. He looked from Nick to Kelly Ross, then to the other officers in the room. "Where's my wife?" he asked, his voice hoarse. "Lucy--?"

Ross stepped forward. "Mr. Reese, I'm Detective Ross, this is Detective Knight. We're investigating your son's disappearance. Your wife is fine--"

A door closed down the corridor. Nick looked up and saw Natalie approaching, accompanied by the woman he identified from the surveillance photos as the child's mother. As soon as she saw her husband, she began to cry. Sobbing, she ran into his arms.

"God, Brian, I only took him to see Santa, that was all! He wanted to see Santa--"

The man wrapped his arms around his wife. "I thought we weren't going to do that this year," he said, eyes glazed over. "I thought we agreed, we don't have the money--"

His wife pushed away from him. "So it's my fault?" She spun around wildly, looking from one of them to another. "I took to my son to see Santa! That's not a crime. He's a good boy. He wanted to--"

Her eyes rolled back in her head and she collapsed. Nick, just a hair faster than her

husband, caught the woman and lifted her to the couch on Natalie's instructions. "Keep her feet elevated," called Natalie, above the tumult. "And somebody call first aid--"

"It's next door," said a security man, who headed immediately for the exit.

"Good, they can take over." Backing away, Natalie touched Nick's arm and gestured away from the crowd.

"Did you get anything?" he asked, following her.

Natalie shook her head. "Detective Ross probably got more. She was borderline hysterical when we showed up. I thought I'd calmed her down a bit, but the sight of her husband--" Biting her lip, she looked back at the crowd that surrounded the woman. "I'd suggest a mild sedative, something to take the edge off. She blames herself. She and Brian haven't been doing too well this year, cash wise. They agreed to play down the whole Christmas thing. The baby's small enough not to notice that he's missing out. But they have a television. And the kid became obsessed with Santa. So the next thing she knows, they're in the car, driving out here to visit Santa--"

"And the child gets snatched."

"Something like that." Her eyes looked up at him. "Can you use your . . . you know . . . to find something? Anything?"

There was so much faith in her eyes, he didn't want to answer. Pausing, he looked up, away, then his glance fell on the blank surveillance monitor. Suppressing a shudder, he took a deep breath. "There's nothing more to do. Kelly's got the drill down to a fine art form. And there have been too many people through that area since the kidnapping--the crime scene's gone. If there'd been some blood spilled, maybe--" He shrugged.

"Well, we can thank God there was none of that, at least." She took a deep breath, as if to steady herself. "You want my unsolicited opinion?"

Suddenly, Nick realized that she'd slipped her hand into his. He nodded down at her. "Anything, Nat. Anything."

"Continue with the drill. Take them both back to the station, after the mother checks back in. Have them look at the photos. Keep them busy. They need to feel they're doing something. We've got to keep them from realizing there's not a damn thing they *can* do."

"I'll have Kelly take them back," promised Nick, meeting the eyes of the other detective across the room, letting her know that he wanted to speak with her. "I think I'll try downstairs. Who knows, maybe . . . something . . . ?"

Natalie smiled at his half-hearted shrug and squeezed his hand. "I'll head back to the office, then."

"I thought you were off."

"I was. If something comes up, I want to be there." Her smiled turned into a grim line

as she indicated the parents. "It's kind of sick, I guess. They think about their little boy, and they see a walking, breathing two-year-old. In my mind, I'm already tallying supplies and doing a prep for the autopsy. Occupational hazard."

As Natalie gathered up the bags she'd left behind the desk, Nick touched her arm again. "Nat--one last thing. Kelly never told me the child's name."

"Christopher," she answered flatly, her eyes going to the mother, who'd regained consciousness and was now weeping hysterically in the arms of one of the mall medical staff. "But they call him Chris."

"As in *Christ*mas?"

Her eyes met his for a moment and she frowned as he looked away. "Is there something up with you? Is there something you know about this you need to tell me?"

He hesitated for the barest of heartbeats, wanting to explain about LaCroix and the picture from the surveillance camera, about Janette and their toast, about Copenhagen so many years ago . . .

But he could easily be wrong. The death of that child should have nothing to do with the disappearance this one, no matter what his gut instinct said. And he'd thought often about LaCroix since the beginning of the season--combining his image with a blurry picture from a camera was a simple trick of his imagination.

"No," he told her, reinforcing the lie with what he hoped was a convincing smile. "No, it's just--this. The same thing that's got everyone down. Having to deal with this so close to Christmas."

She nodded her understanding. "Call me later, okay?"

Only after he nodded his agreement did she head for the door, balancing her shopping bags with care. That was when Nick tapped one of the security guards at the surveillance desk on the shoulder. Leaning forward onto the electronic board, he asked, "Could I see that still frame one more time?"

He had to be sure. He had to *know.*

"Detective Knight?" asked another of the security guards.

He looked up. The man held a telephone receiver out for him. "It's for you. Downtown."

His heart beat twice. He grabbed the phone and took a deep breath, knowing the news was either going to be very good . . . or very bad. "Knight here."

That's when he realized that everyone else in the room knew the score. There was silence, punctuated by occasional sobs from the child's mother.

"Nick, we've got an all clear," said Schanke's voice. "We've got the kid. He's fine."

Nick placed his hand over the mouthpiece. He met the mother's worried eyes. "Christopher's fine. They've got him." Slipping his hand off the mouthpiece, he

turned his back to the rejoicing parents and cheering security and asked softly, "Where and how?"

"He was dropped off here. And I do mean *here*--right on the front steps." There was a note of wonder in Schanke's voice. "He was sitting on the steps, crying his eyes out. We've got no idea how he got here. Seems okay, but we had the EMT's pick him up and take him to Westside, just in case."

Nick sighed in relief. "Good work, Schank. I'll send the parents down. Oh, and put in a call to Natalie. She's heading back to her office."

"Natalie? What's she got to do with this? Nick?"

He hung up the phone and walked over to the parents, who were seated on the couch. Squatting down to their level, he said evenly. "Christopher's fine--he was dropped off at the police station. They've taken him to Westside hospital, just to check him over." Nodding to Kelly, he added, "Detective Ross will take you over there."

"Thank you, Detective Knight," cried Mrs. Reese, throwing her arms around his shoulders and hugging him. "God bless you. Thank you."

Embarrassed, he looked to Kelly Ross for help. Almost instantly, she'd turned her attention to the security guards, but not quite fast enough.

He'd seen the tears sparkling in the corners of her eyes, as well.

* * *

It was a welcome change not to be entering the hospital though the emergency room doors. Nick hesitated just inside the entrance, then saw Natalie sitting in the general waiting area. She stood and waved him over.

Vaulting a couch, he reached for her and pulled her into his arms, lifting her from the floor as he hugged her. Then a nurse walked by and he set her back on the floor, smiling sheepishly. "Sorry."

"Don't be," she answered, eyes shining. "We've got reason to celebrate. He's fine."

Nick's gaze moved to the hospital corridor. "How's it going?"

"Last I looked, they'd given Lucy a mild sedative. They've got her in a private room with Chris." She sank back into one of the waiting room chairs. "I think Kelly Ross is still with them."

"Good. She's the officer of record, let her handle it." Falling into a chair beside her, and nearly sending the attached row of chairs backward with the force of the movement, Nick sighed. "Besides, I don't think I'd be much help in talking to a two year old."

"Oh yeah? How come?"

He grinned, meeting her challenge. "Well, first there's the age difference--"

"Not from where I'm sitting." Natalie jumped from her seat before he could swat her arm. Then she leaned down and picked up a small package from beneath her seat. "Since you gave me my present early--"

Nick took the red ribboned package from her, then held it to his ear and shook it. It clanked. He cast a suspicious eye on her, then the package. "You're not going to let me wait for Christmas, are you?"

"You'd better not," she threatened.

Tossing the package from one hand to the other, Nick rose to his feet, pretending to consider her suggestion. "Maybe I'll have it x-rayed."

"Nick!"

He started toward the front desk, but paused as Natalie began to protest. "You should learn patience," he told her, as he seated himself again.

"Yeah, maybe if I had a hundred years to--great, he *unties* ribbons. I bet you reuse the paper, too."

Nick stopped in mid-movement, part of the ribbon untied, and put on a wounded air. "Printed paper used to be scarce."

"And vampire-police detectives are going to get a lot scarcer if they don't learn the proper way to open packages," Natalie whispered, leaning toward him. "Just open it already!"

Sighing loudly in defeat, Nick ripped the paper and ribbon from the package. It took him only a few seconds more to open the box, revealing seven stainless steel corkscrews. He looked up at Natalie in surprise.

"I figured you must not have any at the loft," she explained, tucking her leg under her, as she sat back at the chair. "And stepping on half-chewed corks gets real old, real fast. Besides--" she lowered her voice again, "if you have to go back to the bottle, I want to make you work for it. Every second longer is a victory. And maybe, someday, it'll be just too much of a pain in the ass to bother getting the cork out."

Nick stared down at the corkscrews and smiled. "I don't know what to say. I don't think anyone's ever given me corkscrews before."

"Yeah. Just . . . don't tell Schanke. And if you do, don't let me hear the comments, okay?" Rising from her chair, she took a step back, then another, suddenly awkward. "Look, I'm going to check on Lucy and Christopher. I'll tell Ross that you're out here."

"Thanks." He rose to his feet as well. "And thanks for the present. Merry Christmas."

She paused, hands clasped together, her cheeks flushed. "Yeah. Merry Christmas." And then she ran down the hall, out of his line of sight.

Returning to his seat, Nick stared down at the corkscrews in wonder. One for each hundred years behind him. Or one for each day of the week. It was all a matter of perspective, really. That's what Nat kept trying to tell him. There was a way to beat this thing. There had to be.

"Detective Knight?"

Putting the box top back, he rose from his seat and found himself facing Brian Reese. The man moved toward him hesitantly, a few steps at a time. "Mr. Reese, how's Christopher? And your wife?"

Reese smiled, almost shyly and tucked his hands in his coat pockets. "Lucy, she kind of gets upset sometimes. And thinking that we lost Chris--" He swallowed hard and looked down at the floor. When he looked up, some of his hesitancy was gone. "But Chris is fine. And we, Lucy and I, wanted to thank you and Detective Ross."

"No thanks necessary," said Nick. "We were doing our jobs. We're just glad it worked out for the best. And we're going to find the man who kidnapped your son."

"Yeah, well." Reese looked toward the admitting desk, then down at the floor again. "Detective Ross had the hospital people take Chris' clothes . . ."

There was something wrong, but Nick couldn't put his finger on it. Then he remembered Kelly's comments about the family funds dwindling. "I'll make certain they're returned to you," he promised.

"Not that. I mean, they're just clothes. But, there's something I thought you should take a look at. I was there when they were undressing Chris--Lucy was out of it and he was crying and they wanted me to make sure all the clothes were his and all--" The man shook his head, as if unable to accept the scope of what had been asked of him. "I didn't see them at first, but I'm pretty sure they fell from Chris' pocket when the nurse pulled off his overalls."

Nick felt a cold chill steal over him and took a step closer to Reese. "See what?"

After a pause, Reese withdrew his hand from his pocket and held it out toward Nick, palm upward. There was a coin in his hand--a gold coin--and several burnt stick matches.

"I bet it's gold, isn't it?"

But Nick couldn't answer. For a moment, his eyes were blinded by the glitter of the coin and the memory of snow . . . and burnt matches.

He had stared at LaCroix in horror. "You took that child's life for you own sake, not for mine," he accused, yet he kept his voice quiet--there were mortals near.

"It's my gift to you." Placing his arm around Nicholas' shoulder, he turned him toward the crowd, who were already dispersing. "Imagine, if you will, that poor child. Starving, shivering from the cold, she huddles in the alley and offers matches that no one wishes to buy. If she returns before she's sold all of the matches, she'll be beaten. So she stays. And, just to keep herself warm, she lights a match. One match. How could it be missed?"

LaCroix held his fingers in the air as if holding the match. Nicholas shook the arm from around his shoulders, but found his eyes drawn to that invisible match. "You saw that?"

"I did. When I left you, I returned here. And I watched her. I saw her eyes as she watched the match burn." LaCroix touched his fingers to his lips, puzzlement in his gaze. "I cannot imagine what she saw, Nicholas, but it held her in a trance. Then it burned to the quick and was out."

Nicholas could see Janette now, kneeling beside the cold body. "But there were other matches . . . "

"And I saw her light those, too. First another, single match, but the light was almost as brief as the first. And then a third. It too was gone." LaCroix blew on the tips of his fingers, as if blowing out the match, then made a motion as if flicking the burned stub to the ground.

"And the others? All of the matches were burned."

"Ah," said LaCroix, "yes. The others. I wasn't certain at first what she planned. She walked back and forth in the snow for a bit, but it was obvious that she was still freezing." He shrugged, as if that part wasn't important. "Then she did something odd--she sat down in the snow and she lit all of the matches."

"All?"

"At once," emphasized LaCroix. He shook his head in wonderment. "She leaned against the wall and closed her eyes. That's when I remembered what you'd said about compassion."

Nicholas started guiltily. "What *I* said?"

LaCroix slapped him on the back. "Yes, of course. You said I should show compassion. And I thought, what better way to show it than to rescue that miserable child from her existence. She was going to die in the snow--if she returned without the matches or the money, she'd have been beaten, and, I can assure you, Nicholas, it would not have been the first time. So I eased her suffering. I ended it. For you." Smiling brightly, he slapped Nicholas on the back again. "Isn't that the gift you asked for?"

He vaguely felt the blow, but a harder, colder hand struck inside him, to his heart and the pit of his stomach. He felt stunned, cold beyond belief, but not from the snow. With one step, then another, he stumbled toward Janette, the night watchman, and the few who remained at the side of the body.

Dirty golden hair rested against the snow, then Janette lifted the child's head, cradling it in her lap. With a movement quicker than mortal eyes could follow, she snapped the neck.

With the sound of that snap, quiet enough so that only he could hear, some strength came back to Nicholas. He straightened, an angry fire building inside him. When he turned and crossed the distance to LaCroix, it took all of his will to keep his fangs from falling into place. His eyes, he knew, were nothing like their normal color.

"How *dare* you," he hissed. "How *dare* you blame me! I never asked for that child's life. You took that blood because *you* wanted it, not because I asked you for it or anything else. Yes, she interested you for a few minutes. When you grew bored, you killed her. That's what happens. You grow bored too easily. When you're bored with

Janette, will you destroy her, too? Or me?"

"Take care, Nicholas," replied LaCroix, his own eyes beginning to glow.

"Oh, yes, *take care.*" Holding her skirts above the snow, Janette walked between them, glaring at each of them in turn. "Both of you, with your pathetic posturings. You," she turned to LaCroix, "claim to have shown compassion. You could have done better with a gold coin than with your teeth. That, and a warm bed in the tavern, and the child would be alive." She sniffed as LaCroix stared at her, stunned.

Nicholas smiled at LaCroix's astonishment, but his smile faded as Janette turned toward him, shaking her finger beneath his nose. "And you, Nicola--you're as much to blame as he! I heard that child's voice last night and the night before. You've gold in your purse. You could have tossed her a coin. LaCroix was right--had he not taken her life, she would have frozen in any case. But you do nothing until she's cold. Then, as mortals bend over her, you stand here and hiss at one another, while I must take care of practical matters." Janette stalked back to LaCroix and held her hand out. "Your purse, if you please."

He hesitated only a moment, but then reached inside of his coat and withdrew a slim wallet and a small purse. Ignoring the wallet, Janette took the purse and counted out three gold florins into the palm of her hand. Tossing the purse back at him, she turned and walked back to the body of the child.

Nicholas met LaCroix's gaze, then they followed her. A discussion had ensued as to the disposition of the corpse.

"Her master will have none of her," said a young man, from the tavern's stable. "I've seen the brute. He'd have you throw her in a pauper's grave."

The night watchman shook his head sadly, looking down at the tiny corpse. "That's true enough. Cobbler, you knew something of the child. Is there none who will care for her remains?"

"She came to my shop with the other children," admitted the cobbler, after a brief pause, "but not often. Her master would look to see that she sold her matches on the street, and beat her if he caught her shirking. I slipped her bread and food when I could." He shook his head. "I have a few coppers saved. Perhaps that will be enough to send her soul to rest, poor thing."

Nicholas hung back as Janette approached the men. "Gentlemen," she said, acknowledging their greetings, "we're strangers to your city, but our hearts are touched by this child's end."

"Her Danish is atrocious," said LaCroix, beside Nicholas' ear.

"She speaks more eloquently than we have this evening," countered Nicholas. "Let her finish."

"If you would accept these coins and see that she is properly cared for." When she held out the gold florins, both the eyes of the night watchman and the stable boy shone brightly. Several members of the crowd moved forward. But Janette dropped the coins into the cobbler's hand.

"Lady," he protested, "one will surely be more than enough."

"Then I trust you shall use the rest to feed any other children who come to your shop, as did this one."

The cobbler nodded shyly. "I will do as you ask."

"Then, I thank you. And good Christmastide to you."

Her skirts aswirl, Janette turned her back on the crowd and stalked past Nicholas and LaCroix. "That, *gentlemen*, is compassion," she said quietly. "In future, kindly pay your debts in the coin of the realm and leave philosophy to scholars." Head held high, she continued to the street, in the direction of their residence.

Nicholas moved to follow her but LaCroix caught his arm, staring after her. "It would be best if we left her alone for a time."

"But she--"

LaCroix's lips were twisted in a smile, but there was a warning darkness in his eyes. "Take care, Nicholas. Never underestimate Janette. She may play the coquette, but there is a brain inside that pretty head. I think she resents our inattention this evening and we're apt to pay for that error. Leaving her to her own devices and spending a night at the tavern would not be amiss."

Turning his head, Nicholas saw that Janette had disappeared. Then he realized that LaCroix was already returning to the carriage and their driver. Only as they passed the night watchman carrying away the body of the child did they stop.

As if in a gesture of respect for the dead, LaCroix removed his hat and held it against his chest. "You see," he whispered, "how quickly it goes? The child will be buried in the morning and none but her master will remember her--until he admits the money he would have gained from the matches has been lost, and returns to his bottle. Janette was right that debts should be paid in kind, but that--death--that is the coin of *our* realm." His eyes bored into Nicholas. "That's how we pay and are repaid in the mortal world. It's with your own kind that you belong. With Janette, and myself." He clapped Nicholas on the back and returned his hat to his head, tipping it at a rakish angle. "And in the spirit of the season, I shall allow you to buy the first round. Yes?"

He again headed toward the tavern and Nicholas followed. But as they passed the wall where the child had perished, he could not help but see the outline of the small body, and the handful of blacked matches in the snow.

He still stared at the coin and three stick matches in the man's hand. Only he, Janette, and LaCroix knew of that evening in Copenhagen, of the dead match seller. And LaCroix had been destroyed, he was certain of it. Which left him with only one option.

"How much did she pay you?" he asked, pinning the man with a steady gaze that threatened to turn into gold and bloody fury. "You didn't find those things on the floor--she gave them to you, didn't she?"

Reese stared at him in amazement, returning the matches and coin to his pocket.

"I don't know what you're talking about--"

Nick paused, looking for some mark in the man's eyes that he was under Janette's spell . . . but this was no vampiric power. He took another step forward and Reese backed away. The man was confused, but there was no sign of guilt on him, even as he fell back into a chair. His heartbeat was fast, but the pattern was nothing like that which Nick had learned to associate with a guilty man fearing discovery.

Facing the man, he leaned down on the arms of the chair, trapping Reese in place. "All right. Mr. Reese, I believe you. We're going to pretend that this whole thing never happened."

Reese's eyes glazed over almost immediately. Nick continued to stare at him, his voice low and even. "You didn't find anything on the floor. We never had this conversation." Still holding Reese's gaze, Nick reached into the man's pocket and took the coin and burnt matches. Then he released the chair arms and walked backed to the spot at which he'd stood before.

"Mr. Reese?" he asked.

There was a second's pause before Reese looked up at him, eyes bewildered. "I'm sorry, Detective Knight. I must have--it's all this with Chris and--" The man rubbed his hand across his eyes. "You were saying?"

"I was saying, you might want to check with Detective Ross and the doctor. There's every possibility your wife and son can go home with you this evening."

The tension seemed to lift from the man's shoulders. He rose to his feet, leaning heavily on the arm of the chair, which snapped off under his weight. Wincing, Nick leaped forward and caught Reese before he could pitch head first onto the carpet. "Maybe we'd better get someone to take you home," he amended, making a mental note that he owed the hospital a chair arm and to take more care with the furniture in future.

"Yeah, I'd better go see how they are." Reese turned and took a step out of the waiting area, then looked back. "It's . . .it's a tough time to have a kid, have a family. But without Lucy and Chris--it wouldn't be worth living. Did I--did I thank you?"

"I was only doing my job," said Nick, echoing his earlier answer.

"But thanks, just the same."

Smacking his fist against his palm nervously, Nick began to pace the waiting area. What was going on? There had only been the three of them; Janette, LaCroix, and himself. Could Janette have engineered this without the father's assistance? And, if not, that only left LaCroix . . .

He started at a sound behind him and turned. Natalie stared back at him suspiciously. "If I didn't know you better, I'd suspect you were on a serious caffeine high. What's up?"

Nick gave her a weak smile and shrugged. "Nothing. Not much of a case, is it?"

"You'll get the guy." Then, she hesitated, staring at him. "Nick, you're holding

something back again."

"Me? Naw. It's . . . nothing." He walked away from her, anything to keep from meeting her eyes. Natalie was beginning to know his ways too well. "Just the case."

"Yeah. Just the case." She didn't sound at all convinced. He tried not to hunch his shoulders as he heard her footsteps behind him. "Spill it."

It was an order. And Natalie wasn't going to let him get away. Hands raised at shoulder height in mock surrender, he said, "You're not going to want to hear this--"

"I *knew* it!" She raised her hand into the air, then let it fall to her side. "Okay--I want details. Is this sort of thing going to happen again?"

"No!" he answered fiercely. Then, as the nurse at the reception desk at the far side of the room looked up, he gave the woman a reassuring smile and sank into a seat. "No," he answered, more quietly, looking up at Natalie with what he hoped was sincere contrition. "It will *never* happen again. I'll see to that. As to details--" There were storm clouds gathering in Natalie's eyes. When she crossed her arms, he added, "It'll be safer for all concerned, including the Reese family, if you don't know everything. I'm not sure, but I think it's about something that happened a while back, in Copenhagen."

"Denmark? Like . . . where Hans Christian Andersen was from?"

Nick stared at her blankly. "Who?"

"Hans Christian Andersen." When she got no response, Natalie tucked her leg under her and sat down on the seat beside him, leaning over the arm of the chair. "You know, he wrote fairy tales. Com'on, Nick! Every kid in the world read--uh, scratch that."

"That's right. *Make* me feel ancient."

"It's not my fault you were born before he was. *Long* before he was," she amended, after a thoughtful pause. "But I know you read everything you could get your hands on. He wrote folk-tales, fairy tales about . . . say eighteen thirty-something."

"Eighteen *thirty-something*? Nat, we've gotta do something about your grasp of history." She stuck her tongue out at him, but he didn't care. Her banter was beginning to lift the weight from him.

"You know--God, how could you *not* know? 'The Little Mermaid'? 'The Emperor's New Clothes'?--"

He nodded, the titles starting to make sense. "Okay, yeah. I remember reading some of those about eighteen thirty-something--"

"'The Little Match Girl? 'The Ugly Duckling'?"

"Hold on, hold on," he said, catching her arm, and stopping her recitation. It was simply too much of a coincidence. "What was that last?"

"'The Ugly Duck--'"

"*Before* the duck," pressed Nick.

"Uh . . . 'The Little Match Girl'?"

"And that's about . . . ?"

"A little match girl." When he made a face, she slapped his arm. "No, really. There's this little girl with this amazing gold hair and her grandmother's died and she's selling matches--I guess that's what orphans did--and she's freezing because it's cold outside."

Nick leaned his head on his hand and stared off into space. Natalie's voice seemed to reach him from a great distance, as he picked that night from his memory--the snow and the body of the child, the blonde hair against the white.

"And it's . . . New Year's Eve."

"Christmas," he corrected.

"What? You know the story? I thought--"

Nick waved his hand. "Go on."

He heard her shift in her seat, but he didn't move. The picture was so clear before him. "Well," said Natalie's voice, "it's really cold. So she lights one of the matches, even though she's not supposed to, and she sees this vision of a tree--no, that's later."

He came to himself long enough to cast her a reproachful look, then turned away again.

"Give me a break, I haven't read it in years. But the upshot is that she lights four matches--"

"Three."

"Four. I'm sure it was *four*."

Nick shook his head slightly, seeing the scene in his mind's eyes. "Three. That matched what LaCroix said. And then she lit them all."

"Then she saw a star falling in the sky and knew that someone was dying--of course, it's supposed to be her--then she saw her grandmother in a vision. And she went with her grandmother. The people find her the next morning, because she'd frozen to death--"

"LaCroix killed her. The idiot night watchman didn't know any better. So few did, back then."

Natalie's voice was quieter, slower. "And the people took up a collection to bury her, because she was so poor."

"Janette paid for it. Well," he shrugged, "it was LaCroix's money, but Janette's idea." He started, the vision slipping from him, when Natalie grabbed his arm. "What?"

She stared at him, her nose inches from his. "You *knew* the Little Match Girl?"

Nick met her eyes, then looked away. "I didn't notice her when she was alive. Only . . . after." Then he sat upright in his seat and met her stare. "You mean, there's a *story* about her?"

Natalie's sigh indicated that he was the densest man alive. "That's what I've been asking *you*. If Hans Christian Andersen had been there, or if he'd read about it in a newspaper or something . . ."

Again, Nick cast back through his memory, then shook his head slowly. "There was a small crowd, just the people in the surrounding houses and shops--the stable boy from the tavern, the night watchman, the cobbler--"

"Andersen's *father* was a cobbler."

Nodding thoughtfully, he sank back into his seat. "Yes, that would make sense. Eighteen-thirty-something would be *about* right."

"You met Hans Christian Andersen's *father*?"

Nick turned back to her, amused. "Nat, I think you should do something about this hero-worship thing." More of the memory of that night returned to him--LaCroix's words as the child's corpse passed them echoed in his ears. "LaCroix was wrong," he said in wonder, almost to himself. "He said that no one would ever remember her, that they'd forget her."

"Believe me, it was one of my favorite stories growing up. Sad, but kind of heart-warming."

"And, there's no mention of us? LaCroix, myself, or Janette?" He rubbed his chin, thoughtfully. "Especially Janette."

"No. Not in what I remember. It *was* a long time ago."

"But we could find a copy of it?"

"At a bookstore. Probably in the mall. Which is still open." Natalie rose to her feet. "I can get over there and back in a few minutes."

"Could you?" he asked, glancing toward the hospital corridor. "I've got to check in with Kelly before I head back to the station--she should be out any minute. I get off duty at four."

Natalie's coat was already zippered, she swung her scarf into place and nodded. "I have no idea what's going on . . . but sure. As long as Chris is okay, I'm heading back for a mall crawl. I've still got some things to pick up."

"Not strange men, I hope."

She slapped him with the end of her scarf as she walked by. "They should be so lucky. See you later."

"Thanks, Nat," he called, half-turning in the seat. He waited until she slipped out the

door, into the darkness, then his attention returned to his current problem--who'd kidnapped Christopher Reese, then returned him to the station? It could only be one of the three of them. Which meant one more visit to Janette this night, just to make certain. Because if she wasn't involved . . .

The alternative was unthinkable.

* * *

The Raven was even darker than when he'd entered earlier that evening and, unlike most nights, completely empty at four in the morning. Nick had no difficulty seeing Janette, who was seated at one of the booths in the back. A bottle sat on the table, a half-filled glass before her, and the ashtray was full. His first guess was that she'd been there all night.

"Janette?"

His whisper sounded like a drum roll in the empty club, but even had it been filled with dancers and music, she would have heard him. Her eyes turned from studying a black wall, to meet his across the empty room. "Nicola? And are you here to cancel next Christmas, too?"

"I'm here because I have a problem." He walked to the table behind which she was seated. "We found the child who was kidnapped tonight."

"How good of you. Ever the vigilant . . . police detective."

Dropping the book on the table, he picked up the bottle of blood mixed with wine, then placed it on another table. "Now you've definitely had enough."

"I thought we agreed that you wouldn't mention such things." Janette tried to bat her eyes at him, but failed. Her words weren't quite slurred, but she answered first in English, then in French, until she picked up the book he'd placed on the table. "'The Little Match Girl,'" she read aloud, ending with a giggle. "Nicola, someone's written a book about our girl. The night LaCroix--" Janette dropped the book to the table and leaned back into the booth, covering her face with her hands. "Oh, perhaps you are right. I've had too much to drink."

"Then you don't know anything about these?" He tossed the coin and the match stubs on the table.

Her hands dropped from her face. Janette peered at him, then looked down at the coin. She shook her head, her hand automatically reaching for a cigarette from the case on the table. He could see the effort she was making to sober herself up. "No. I haven't seen a gold florin in--good gracious, it must be at least a century, Nicola. And I use a lighter . . . if there are no helpful, handsome young men around." To emphasize the remark, she reached for the small, mother-of-pearl lighter that sat beside her cigarette case. "It seems curious that there are three, don't you think. Were there three that night?"

There was a sharp sound, a rasp, then the smell of sulfur. Janette gasped, her cigarette falling to the table top, and Nick whirled in place, his hand reaching for his gun.

A light shone in the center of the club. A small flame, like that of a match, moved toward them. As it came closer, Nick saw that the match was held by a hand, the hand connected to an arm, and the arm to a child. It was a girl, no more then seven or eight years of age, with golden hair that shimmered in the light of the flame. Her image flickered slightly as she came toward them, still dressed in her ragged apron and bonnet.

He looked down to see that Janette was beside him. She grabbed his arm and whispered in his ear, "Nicola, I swear that I broke her neck. She had no time to come across. It is not *possible*."

"She's not one of us," he answered, also whispering. "I'm not sure what she is."

The child stopped, only a few feet away. She gave a rough sketch of a curtsey and Nick found himself staring at a pair of brown eyes. He'd never seen her eyes. Her eyelids had been closed--for all eternity he'd thought--when he'd come upon her in the snow. "Lady, sir," she said, in Danish, "have you seen my matches? I've misplaced them and must find them."

Nick gestured toward the table. "Are you looking for these?"

She held the lit match upward, like a torch, so that the light fell upon the table top.

"Why does the match not burn out?" whispered Janette, but Nick held a finger to his lips.

The little girl smiled when she spotted the matches. "Yes, there they are. I lent them to a little boy, to light his way. He was lost, you see, and crying." She picked up the matches with her free hand and they, too, burst into flame. Carefully, she transferred the three matches into one hand, and the light steadied. "It's hard to cry, when you have light. I meant to ask for them, but I couldn't find him. I can't go back without them."

Nick knelt down to the ghost-child's level, shaking off Janette's insistent hold on his arm. "Where did you find the lost boy?"

"Where are any of the lost?" The child smiled at him. "I know you, sir. You did not see me, but I saw you. You had such fine clothes. So straight and tall you stood. And then after . . ." She touched her fingers to the side of her face, brushing back the blond hair. "You needn't have worried after me. I was warmer, then. And in a better place."

The child turned her smile to Janette. "And you were the one who gave me the box in which to sleep. I would have thanked you, lady, were I able."

For the first time in his memory, Janette stood speechless. He gave her his right hand and she squeezed it so fiercely, he was almost afraid that her nails might take off one of his fingers. But he turned his attention back to their visitor.

"Why did you come here?" he asked gently. "Other than for your matches?"

The child stared at him, as if not understanding the question. "Did you not call me?"

"Not to my knowledge." Nick glanced back at Janette, who shook her head quickly.

"To be honest, I haven't thought of you for many years."

"To be thought of is to be called in memory. And if the call is strong enough, we may come back. Especially now, when the holly is cut and Sanct Herr Nicholass travels in the world. Many of us are called. And if the calling is strong and true, we come back. But few may see us. And even fewer may hear." Her brow furrowed as she studied him. "I think you are different than most, sir. And so is the lady."

"I should say so," said Janette, managing to give an air of arrogance even to a nervous whisper.

Then the little girl caught sight of the book on the table. She reached to touch it, but her hand went through it and the top of the table, like a barge through mist. Rising to his feet, and prying his hand from Janette's grip, Nick picked up the book from the table. "Would you like to see this?"

"Yes, please."

He hadn't really looked at the book that Natalie had left for him at the station--seeing only the title and the bright illustrations. It was a children's edition, filled with broad stokes of color and large print. Kneeling down, he held the book, so that the ghost-child could see it.

"What does it say?" she asked, her finger pointing to, but not touching, the letters on the cover.

"Would you like me to read it to you?"

The child nodded. "Oh, yes, please. There's time yet before cock's crow."

"All right." Pulling a chair from another table, Nick sat down and held the book on his lap. The ghost-child stood beside him. Standing, she was shorter than he was seated. She placed a hand on his shoulder gently, then seemed surprised to find him solid--her hand did not pass through him.

"You may lean on me, if you like," said Nick.

She stared at him, then nodded again. Placing a tiny hand on his shoulder, she held the matches high, not knowing that he needed no flame to read.

"'The Little Match Girl,'" read Nick, pointing to each word on the title.

The ghost-child looked into his eyes. "Is that me?"

"I think so."

She nodded, then said, "You may begin."

The words passed quickly, one into another. She made him stop at some, return to others, but the ghost-child was attentive. The brightly colored pictures interested her most. He barely noticed that Janette had joined them, standing at his right side and peering over his shoulder as he read.

The story was not long. "'No one knew what lovely sight she had seen or in what

radiance she had gone with her grandmother into the happiness of the New Year,'" he finished, closing the back cover.

The ghost-child touched her finger to her lips. "That's wrong. It was Christmastide, not the New Year feast."

"That's what I told Natalie."

"And I wasn't mentioned." Janette pouted. "Can you imagine? I pay to have the child buried, and not a word of me. The nerve!"

Nick shook his head, amazed. "Your memory is faulty, Janette. After all, it was LaCroix's gold--"

The flame from the child's matches flickered with his words, almost going out completely. She shivered and stepped back. "Oh please, sir, don't call more than one of us this night. It's bad enough one such as he should walk in the world."

Nick rose to his feet, the book falling from his lap as the child backed away into the darkness of the club, the light from her matches fading. "Wait, don't go! Please!"

She hesitated. On an impulse, he picked up the book and held it out to her. "You've forgotten your present."

"Don't be foolish, Nicola," said Janette. "She tried to take it before--"

"But it wasn't hers before," he answered, meeting the child's eyes. "She's read it. It's her story. And now it's her book."

"Truly?" asked the ghost-child, brown eyes wide. When Nick nodded, she reached out her hand gingerly, touching the edges of the book.

Her grip was solid. When Nick released it, she pulled the book toward her, then held it against her chest. "Thank you, sir and lady. But I must go. You will watch the little boy for me?"

"I will," promised Nick.

"Good." Again, she started to fade as she moved backward, then stopped. Almost as if on impulse she ran forward, planting a kiss on Nick's cheek. Turning, she ran back into the darkness, until they could see only her match, then even that was gone.

Janette reached for the bottle of blood that sat on the table and upended it into her mouth. After taking a large swallow, she offered it to him.

"No, thanks." He touched his hand to his cheek, where the ghost-child had kissed him. "I wonder what that was all about."

"Perhaps, to counter what went before. Remember, Nicola," she said, moving to stand behind him and placing her arm around his neck, "you paid no attention to the child until *after* she was dead."

"Then why were *you* allowed to see her?"

"I'm guilty of the same crime." Sighing, Janette sank down to the floor, then placed her other arm around his neck. "I heard her calling in the night, selling her matches while she was warm, while she breathed. I could have tossed her a few pennies, or a florin, as easily as you."

"The florin--" Nick escaped her embrace and shot out of the chair. The coin still sat on the table, untouched. "She didn't take it."

"Perhaps it didn't belong to her."

"Then who *does* it belong to?"

A whistling sound ran through the club, accompanied by a cold, damp breeze. Janette wrapped her arms around herself, her eyes wide and even Nick shivered, although he wasn't usually bothered by cold. He picked it up and looked at it.

"Get rid of it," hissed Janette, her eyes meeting his. "Drop it in a poor box. A *church* poor box, if possible."

"It's just a coin," he said. But he dropped it onto the table. Then he turned, to face Janette. "If the match girl was trying to return that missing boy to me, do you think it's possible that he was taken by--"

"No!" Janette put her hands over her ears. "Nicola, I will hear *no* more talk of ghosts of Christmases past. I am going to my flat and sleep the day and night through until this dreadful holiday is over." Quickly, she gathered up her cigarette case, lighter, and purse, which had been sitting on the bench.

"And that?" Nick gestured toward the coin, still sitting in the center of the table.

Shuddering, Janette closed her eyes, then opened them again and headed for the door. "Leave it. Perhaps Alma will think it's a tip and take care of it for us."

"Fine." Nick followed Janette through the club, to the main door. He held it for her as she passed outside, and was just about to close it when he heard a long, low laugh from inside the darkness of the club.

Janette stopped in her tracks and stared back at him, eyes wide. "I didn't hear anything."

"Neither did I," he answered, with far less conviction. When he made a move to go back inside, she leaned past him, grabbed the door handle, and slammed it closed firmly behind them both.

The End

Flowers in the Night

by Sharon S. Scott

"I'll be out of the office for a week or so--I'm going to visit my parents for Christmas." Natalie was suddenly struck by the question of what vampires did at Christmas. She hadn't given it a thought before. If they were Christian *before* they were turned, did they celebrate Christmas as a religious occasion? Did they decorate trees and send out cards and buy gifts for one another? Images of bottles of blood wrapped in festive paper danced in her head. No, it was too gruesome to think about. Nick had been away over the holidays every year since she'd met him, so the question hadn't come up. Should she ask him? No, probably not. But on second thought . . . no, she wouldn't . . . yes . . . no . . . Oh, the hell with it, why not?

She made her voice deliberately casual. "What are your plans for the holidays?"

Nick's tone matched hers. "I get to work. We're going to be really short-handed, and Schanke's been saving his vacation days so he and Myra and Jenny can visit his parents. So I'll be covering for him." He didn't mention that all the talk of family get-togethers during the holidays still made him miss his own family, even after so many years. "Have a good trip, and be careful. You know how many drunks there are on the roads during holidays."

"Okay, don't work too hard, and be careful yourself. I'll see you next year. Bye." She had a feeling there was something she'd forgotten to say, but couldn't remember what it was. Oh well, it would come to her.

Nick knew what she'd forgotten. His birthday. January 1. He would be 36, or was it 37? He always had trouble remembering the birth date Larry had provided for him. He shouldn't care--he'd forgotten her birthday, too. If Schanke hadn't reminded him . . .

He smiled at the thought of the thousand and one questions Nat was probably wanting to ask him about vampires and Christmas. But his smile faded as he thought of the answers he'd have to give her. He didn't celebrate Christmas--it would be a sacrilege. He was always lonely over the holidays--almost all the humans he knew spent the season with their families. His family . . . no, he refused to think of all that again. It was time to go to work. He turned the answering machine on as he shrugged into his shoulder holster and then headed for the garage.

* * *

Christmas Eve was always a quiet night for the police. Everyone was home, either putting together children's toys or wrapping gifts. A few drunks, a few domestic

squabbles. Rarely any homicides. He spent his shift catching up on paperwork, and went home to sleep just as millions of children were waking their parents up far too early to see what Santa had left for them, if they'd been good. He wondered fleetingly if Mr. Claus would think *he'd* been "good". Sure. The blinking lights and tinsel in the store windows looked pale in the dimness just before dawn. The nativity scenes in front of the churches revealed their makeshift construction and extension cords. Nothing like the candles and mysticism of the masses he had attended as a child.

He picked up his mail and checked for messages when he arrived at home. No messages on the machine. He took off his holster and laid it and the gun on the coffee table. He turned on the television and sat on the couch to open the mail--a Christmas card from Stonetree, junk mail, utility bills. He used the remote to close the shutters, then checked out the fare on television. "Miracle on 34th Street" was on one channel, "It's a Wonderful Life" on another, and most of the others had church services. He hit the off button on the remote, got a bottle from the refrigerator, and picked up a book from the end table as he stretched out on the sofa. The Warhol diaries--Schanke had brought the book to work and had insisted that he read it. He took a drink and began to read.

He was startled mid-book by the sound of the elevator door opening. Hadn't he armed the security system? He almost dropped the bottle as he reached for his gun. The weapon was in his hand before the door had opened fully to reveal Janette, who had a look of mock terror on her face, and had her hands raised.

"Oh, please, Monsieur le detective, don't shoot me."

"Janette, don't do things like that. Damn." He put the gun back in its holster and sat down on the sofa again. Janette remained standing in the doorway.

"May I lower my hands now? I assure you that I'm no danger to you."

Nick took a long drink from the bottle, then looked over at her. "Do whatever you wish, Janette, as always."

"Aren't you happy to see me, Nicholah?" She lowered her hands, picked up a bag that was near her feet, and moved towards him.

"I'm ecstatic. Can't you tell?" He picked up the book and tried to find his place. Janette stopped at the back of the couch, reached down and removed the book from his hands, replacing it with the bag.

"Open it."

He looked from the bag to her face, and back. "What is it?"

Janette smiled. "Open it and find out."

He hesitated, then opened the bag. Inside was a small package wrapped in cloth and tied with a thin silk ribbon. And a wine bottle. He removed the bottle and looked at the label. "That's a very expensive year."

"I can afford it. And so could you, if only you were so inclined." She glided to the kitchen, got two wine glasses, and held them out as she sat on the other end of the couch. "What are we celebrating?"

"Nothing in particular. The club was almost deserted, I was bored, and I thought perhaps two old friends could enjoy a talk and a bottle of wine." He didn't respond. She raised the glasses, and said impatiently, "What are you waiting for? Open it. Or don't you drink wine anymore, since you became such a solid citizen?"

He didn't answer, but opened the bottle and poured the wine into the glasses as she held them out to him. She watched him as he stared into the depths of the dark red liquid. She watched him, waiting for him to take a drink. He didn't. He just kept staring into the glass. "It's wine, Nicholah. Just wine. Nothing else--nothing that could contaminate you." She stood and reached for his glass. As her hand closed over his, he spoke softly.

"I was just remembering."

She drew her hand back and sat back down on the couch. "What are you remembering?" She sipped the wine and waited for his answer.

"Do you remember the year this wine was laid down?" When she looked puzzled, he continued. "It was the year we were in Mexico. Just the two of us, for . . . how long was it? . . . before LaCroix showed up again." He drained his glass and reached for the bottle.

"Eight months. We were together for eight months. Yes, I remember. It was glorious. For a while." She finished her wine and held her glass out for a refill. "Do you remember the man who played the guitar while we danced in the moonlight in the plaza?"

"And the bird outside our window singing us to sleep every morning?" He filled her glass and his, and leaned back into the cushions of the couch, turning the wine glass in his hands. "Those white flowers that bloomed only at night . . ." He broke off and gulped down the contents of the glass. He looked at Janette, and saw his own pain at those memories reflected in her face. He put his glass down on the table, moved closer to her, and touched her cheek. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have brought it up. I know how he hurt you."

"He hurt both of us. As he had done in the past, and would still be doing if you hadn't killed him." She handed him her glass. "I shouldn't have come here. This was not one of my better ideas." She rose to leave, but Nick took her hand and wouldn't release it.

"Don't go, please. Don't . . . " He kissed her with a desire that hadn't ceased in centuries, and she responded in equal measure. He broke away to kiss her cheek, the hollow behind her ear, and the softness of her neck. She shuddered, her knees seemed to weaken, and his hands moved to her waist to steady her, then to enfold her. She pulled away slightly, and he looked into her eyes. He whispered "Oui?" She answered by reaching for the neck of his shirt and ripping downward, then put one finger on his chest and pushed him backward onto the couch. In one fluid motion she was on top of him. Her hands moved to the back of her head, but he stopped her, and the dark softness of her hair flowed around her face as he removed the pins himself. He reached for her, but she shook her head and just looked at him a moment. He started to speak, but she put a finger to his lips to silence him. Her hands moved over his face, touching the faint circles under his eyes, the soft skin of his cheeks, his mouth, as if she were learning him again. She traced those same places with kisses as his fingers wove themselves into her hair. And then the desire

became hunger, and the hunger became need, and they moved together without conscious thought.

She wasn't there when he awoke. But the small package that had been in her bag was on the coffee table, and when he unwrapped it and opened the box, he found a white flower. It was carved from white jade, and it was an exact replica of the white flowers that bloomed only at night.

The End

Trick or Treat

by Susan M. Garrett

Natalie hummed a Christmas carol softly to herself as she rode the elevator up to Nick's loft. The brown paper bag crackled ominously and she shifted the package in her arms. She wasn't about to spill a morning's work all over his elevator. Even if it wasn't *the* solution to his problem, it was a good start. She'd dropped by his loft on her way to work this evening, eager to show him her results.

The elevator stopped with a slight jump and the door opened. Again shifting the brown paper bag, Natalie walked into the loft, heading for the kitchen area. "Sorry to drop by unannounced, but I think you'll actually like this one. The color and texture are right--"

There seemed to be no one in the loft and the shutters over the windows remained closed. Then Janette's head appeared over the edge of the leather sofa. "Dr. Lambert," she purred, rising and crossing the floor in a fluid movement, like a great cat. Pausing, she smiled. "I mean--*Natalie*. How nice of you to drop by."

Forcing her lips to match Janette's smile, Natalie placed her burden on the counter, concentrating on the paper bag and its contents. The hair on the back of her neck tingled whenever she ran into Janette. The scientist in her told her that her reaction was natural--even Nick's presence made her skin crawl at times, especially when he did weird stuff. The remnants of a number of previous psychology courses supported her suspicion that her reaction also made sense in the area of 'female competition for the attention of the male.'

But Janette also happened to be a friend of Nick's . . . a very *close* friend, from what she'd seen. And if she was going to be able to help him, she had to deal with Janette one on one, without animosity or fear or the need to compete. It was time to ply her skills as a consummate professional.

If only the hair on her neck wouldn't tingle . . .

Janette moved beside her, peering into the paper bag. "Hmn, is that for Nicola? He's upstairs at the moment, dressing. For all they pretend, they preen before a mirror as often as we do." Then she cast Natalie a sympathetic smile as she reached into the bag and pulled out one of the thermoses. "Well, *some* of us."

Self-consciously, Natalie reached up her hand to push her hair back from her face and under her ski hat. She reached for the thermos, but Janette moved away quickly, dancing just beyond her reach in a movement that as swift as it was delicate. With one twist, she unthreaded the lid and the cap came off in her hand. She looked down at the liquid inside and pursed her lips. "How unpleasant. And the stench is . . . remarkable."

"I haven't started working on that end of it, yet," said Natalie defensively. Tearing off her mittens, she flung them onto the counter, beside the bag.

"It would seem you have your work cut out for you." Janette opened the refrigerator door and placed the thermos on a lower shelf. "Now, I thought Nicola might enjoy a change of pace from your potions," she said, reaching inside and withdrawing a corked wine bottle. "It's from my private stock."

Natalie didn't have to have the senses of a vampire to know that the bottle contained human blood, instead of the cow blood on which he'd been surviving for some time. She looked away, uncomfortable with the idea that the bottle contained something that flowed through her own veins and kept her alive. "He's been trying to cut back."

"Not from what I saw today."

She saw of the empty bottles scattered across the living room, just as Janette spoke. There were at least three in her line of sight, and no doubt more beyond the couch. A part of her stomach twisted in disappointment and there was a sudden tightness in her shoulders, caused by not knowing whether to blame Janette for tempting him or Nick for succumbing.

But she had to give him the benefit of the doubt, at least for the moment. Nodding, she met Janette's victorious look with a grim smile. "I understand."

"Perhaps you only *think* you do," warned Janette. "But there are some things about him that you will never know." Placing the bottle back into the refrigerator, Janette closed the door. "For later," she explained, facing Natalie. "And I should get back to the Raven."

"Well, don't let me keep you."

Janette's look almost dared her to try. "We're so busy this time of year," she explained. "So many mortals become depressed around the holidays."

"I'd think it would be worse for your kind--after all, with all your friends and family dead . . ." It was a cheap shot and Natalie regretted it instantly. But it did hit home. Janette turned her face away, her ivory profile cold and perfect.

It was marred only by a sudden frown. "*Merde.* I forgot to file my flight plan. It'll take me twice as long to get back, now."

"Flight plan? Are you going somewhere for the holidays?"

"No. Just back to my club." Janette looked back at her and raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Nicola hasn't explained about flying? And after all this time, too. I really thought he trusted you."

"What *about* flying?" asked Natalie cautiously. There was an edge to Janette's voice that made her uneasy. "You're not telling me you have to file a flight plan to fly across town?"

The look on Janette's face was that of a teacher indulging a slow pupil-- it made Natalie's cheeks burn. "There are so many of us, we have to take precautions to avoid collisions. And with taller and taller buildings rising at a moment's notice, not

to mention high tension wires, television transceivers, power conductors, or the occasional low flying plane . . . it is only common sense, *n'est-ce pas*?" Sighing extravagantly, as if bored, she covered her mouth with her hand, a dainty gesture. "Ask Nicola, by all means. He'll explain it to you. As for me, I *must* fly." She slinked to the elevator door, then turned, waiting for it to open. "Merry Christmas, Natalie. And . . . give my love to Nicola, won't you?"

"Yeah, sure," answered Natalie, after the elevator door closed behind Janette. "When Hell freezes over."

After tossing her attempt at maintaining a professional attitude into the empty paper bag with an overhand throw--"Two points"--she snatched the bag from the counter and headed out into the living room, promising herself that she wouldn't try to figure out which bottles had held human blood and which had held cow blood. She could, at least, make a fairly accurate count of the number that Janette had downed--the red lipstick was unmistakable. There were some pretty odd things about Nick, but wearing lipstick wasn't one of them.

She heard the bedroom door close and looked up. Nick was walking down the staircase, slipping one arm into a suit jacket and checking the sleeve for some imagined flaw. "Janette, what do you think about--"

To his credit, he stopped cold when he saw her, but then continued down the steps almost mechanically. "Nat--hi. I didn't know you planned on dropping by."

Trying her best to maintain an even expression, Natalie brandished one of the empty bottles at him. "Obviously."

"You shouldn't be doing that. Leave those, I'll take care of them later." He surreptitiously kicked two bottles under the couch--no lipstick--then froze a second time and glanced around the loft. "Janette--?"

"Just left." The paper bag was full. Hoisting it into her arms, and avoiding Nick's attempt to take it from her, Natalie returned to the kitchen. "I should have called before I dropped by," she apologized. "But I spent a few extra hours in the lab, after shift. I think I've come up with a couple of improvements for the protein drink. Of course, the red dye causes cancer in laboratory rats . . . but doesn't everything?"

She abandoned the bag of bottles on the counter. Slipping behind her, Nick quickly dropped the entire thing into a garbage can and closed the lid on it. It was such a pathetic move, it almost made her smile. He even tried to get between her and the fridge, not realizing that she'd already seen what remained of Janette's idea of holiday cheer, but she slipped underneath his arm and took out the thermos.

"And speaking of laboratory rats . . . and other kinds . . . try *this*."

He jerked back as she shoved the open thermos underneath his nose. "Of course, I have to work on the smell," she admitted, holding it close to her own nose and taking a whiff. To her senses it was slightly less nauseating than rotten meat, but with his acute vampiric senses--it *would* explain why he turned a rare shade of green. "But the color's closer. And it's less lumpy. You want to give me a taste test?"

Nick, bless his little ten-beats-a-minute heart, took another step back at even the hint that she'd hand the thermos over to him. "Maybe later. I'm not really hungry

right now."

"Oh, yeah. Right." She put the cover back on the thermos and spun it tightly into the lock position--it made her feel better and no matter how tight she made it, Nick would be able to get it open later. But then when he re-opened the refrigerator door, her gaze fell on the bottle of human blood.

And she couldn't look away, even as she placed the thermos, as Janette had, on the lower shelf. "I told you--you won't get anywhere if you keep going back to that stuff."

"We've had this conversation before--" began Nick.

Natalie slammed the refrigerator door, stalking into the living room. "And we're having it again. And we're going to keep having it until you decide whether you're serious about becoming human again . . . or you tell me to drop the whole thing." She whirled, then fell back a step, not having realized how close behind her he was. "Is that what you want?" she asked harshly. "Because if it is, I can walk out that door, and you won't have to deal with any of this ever again."

"That's not what I want and you know it."

Natalie took a deep breath and walked a few more steps away. Because he didn't have to breathe like her, he could mask the fact that he was pissed off when he wanted to. She, however, was letting him know just how she felt. And as long as she was on the subject--"Look, you're going to have to do something about Janette."

"Oh?"

She wasn't certain *what* she heard in his tone of voice, but Natalie was pretty sure she didn't like it. Taking another deep breath, she faced him and found the couch between them. "She's your drinking buddy. You take one step forward with me, then she takes you two steps back. If you want *this* to continue, *that* has to stop."

His eyes met hers for a second, then he looked away. "Janette's . . . been with me for a long time. It's hard to refuse her."

Remembering that perfect profile and the slinky dress, Natalie smirked inwardly and muttered, "I'll bet." He tilted his head slightly at her comment and she cursed herself for not remembering how good his hearing really was. Objectivity--that was the key. She'd lost some ground and she had to stay objective to pick it up again.

"I don't care if you *see* her," she answered, wondering if that super hearing would hear the lie in her voice and the skip in her heartbeat. "Just don't *drink* with her. I can't say that I understand the relationship between you two. You told me she brought you across, right?"

Nick shook his head slightly, turning his back to her. "Almost. She was the bait. LaCroix brought me across." His shoulders slumped. "Janette wasn't to blame."

"Yeah. They said that about the iceberg that hit the Titanic, too." She was instantly sorry for the comment when he froze in place. "Nick--I--"

"We've dealt with that, Janette and I. At first, it didn't really matter."

There was something in his stance and the set of his shoulders she didn't like. Natalie took a step forward and put her knee on the leather couch, but hesitated in reaching out to touch him. He hadn't told her much about the first few hundred years he'd spent as a vampire, but from what she'd heard, it hadn't been good. *He* hadn't been good.

Seeing him now, as vulnerable as he was, it was hard to believe. But there were moments, when his eyes changed color and he snarled, fangs extended--inwardly she shuddered, the memories too fresh to bear. When that happened, he scared the hell out of her. And she could well believe he'd been the monster that he claimed.

Nick chose that moment to turn and his face softened in concern almost immediately--he must have seen the fear in her eyes. "Nat--look, I'm sorry. It's . . . well, it's Christmas. Janette and I were kind of talking over old times. We haven't shared many Christmases together lately. There was some catching up to do."

"That's really none of my business, isn't it?" she said softly. Backing away from the couch, and him, she looked at the shutters that still covered the windows. "Your relationship with Janette is between you two. I'm just sticking my nose in again." Shaking her head, she forced a smile. "Old nosy-Parker Lambert."

"I'll try the drink later," said Nick. "I promise."

The forced smile was replaced by a real one. Turning on her heels, Natalie nodded at him and shook her finger. "You'd better. And if you don't get a move on, you'll be late and Stonetree'll dock you from the Christmas caroling session tomorrow night."

His eyes went wide and he ran a hand through his hair nervously. "Uh, Nat, about this caroling stuff--"

"And speaking of late, I've got two autopsies scheduled and a half dozen reports to finalize." Zipping up her jacket, Natalie headed for the elevator. Once there, she stopped and turned. "Oh, and there was something I wanted to ask you. Janette said something about having to file a flight plan?"

"A *what*?" asked Nick, taking a step toward her.

The suspicious tone in his voice gave her a second's pause and she began to believe she'd been had. Swallowing hard, Natalie forced another smile--she was getting better at them, with all the practice--and said, "Oh, nothing." Then she punched the button for the elevator again.

But Nick walked toward her, smiling. "You said 'flight plan'? As in *flying*?"

Looking skyward, Natalie announced, "I want to die. Here. Now." It was only when he started laughing that she felt her cheeks go crimson. "Well, I never *know* with your kind," she protested. "You can be so deadpan--"

That set him off even more. But he seemed to calm down when he began to realize how angry she was. Hands raised in surrender, he stood across from her, trying to fight back a smile. "Okay--you're right. That wasn't nice of Janette. But you can't blame her. It's tradition."

She rolled her eyes at the word--again with the 'blame'. What was Janette made of,

Teflon? But the rest of his excuse intrigued her. "Wait a minute, this is something I missed. So, you get some poor mortal to believe two stupid things a day or what?"

Nick was still trying not to laugh. He had to turn away and mumbled a gruff, "Sorry," under his breath, collecting himself before he could face her. Finally, he coughed a few times and turned, more or less composed. "It's out of the riddle tradition--you tell riddles at Christmas to confuse the bad spirits and keep them from ruining the good time. It usually started out innocently enough, but by the time the party had gone on a good two or three hours, it got pretty raw."

"Do you remember any of the riddles?"

Nick opened his mouth, then closed it again. He looked down at the floor, then away. And she realized, after a second, that his very pale cheeks were doing their version of blushing.

Laughing, she pointed at him. "Hah! I knew it! You only remember the dirty ones!"

At that, he laughed and rubbed his chin. "They *were* pretty bad. And they're not all that dated, either."

"Some things get better with age. And people." Their eyes met for a moment. There was something there, between them, something she wasn't certain *should* be there--it was too soon. Looking away, toward the kitchen and anything other than those very intense eyes, she cleared her throat. "So what does that have to do with Janette making a damn fool out of me?"

"That's the word--fool. It was called foolscapping. You played a practical joke on someone. If it succeeded, it meant that you'd have good luck in the coming year--"

"At their expense," guessed Natalie, her lips twisting in a wry smile. And then, a completely impossible and daringly brilliant idea began to form in her mind. "And this goes on for how long? Although I'm certain I'm going to endure a lot of 'flight' jokes in the near future."

Nick bit back a smile. "From St. Thomas' Day . . . the twenty-first--"

"Okay, 'doubting Thomas.' I get that one."

"Until Christmas Eve, which is tomorrow. So you're relatively safe until next year. It's bad luck to foolscap the same person more than once."

"Is the foolscappee allowed to become the foolscapper?"

Nick shrugged. "Yes. It's happened." Then his eyes narrowed. "Natalie, tell me you're not thinking what I think you're thinking."

"Only if the next words out of your mouth are--'and I want to be a part of it,'" she warned.

"You have no idea--"

"Look," she said, pointing toward him with her mittened hand, "we mortals have been putting up with this sort of shit from you people for centuries. And it's about

time we got our own licks in. So, are ye for me or agin me?"

Again, Nick held up his hands in a pretend surrender. "All right, I'll help, I'll help. But I hope you know what you're doing."

"Oh, I know *exactly* what I'm doing." She turned away, eyes gleaming, Nick's worried expression only fueling her fire for revenge. Objectivity be damned, Janette was going to get her own back--in spades. "I'm going to give Janette her worst nightmare."

Nick expressed interest with the quirk of an eyebrow, but his expression was still worried. And Natalie's heart sang at the thought that she--little Natalie Lambert, mortal coroner extraordinaire--could scare the willies out of a former big, bad vampire.

* * *

"Come on, come on," said Nick, reaching into the elevator and grabbing her arm. He all but dragged her into the kitchen. "She'll be here any second."

"Give me a minute, will ya?" Shaking him off, Natalie slipped out of her coat, which Nick tossed halfway across the living room, then moved over to the bag of provisions he'd gathered at her request. "We had two accidents this morning, so I had to stay late. I almost showed up covered in blood."

"I should be so lucky," he answered.

Deciding to ignore the comment, Natalie sat down on a chair Nick pulled up for her and looked into a small makeup mirror he'd provided. "I look too healthy."

"Red-blooded," he agreed. He dumped the contents of the bag onto the countertop and fished through the makeup, presenting her with one.

Natalie wrinkled her nose at the color. "I don't think I should look *that* dead."

"Would you *please* hurry?" He stalked to the windows, the shades open to admit the first blues and blacks of twilight.

Shaking her head, Natalie dropped the tube of stage paint and chose another from the selection. "You're really getting into this, aren't you? And you'd better close the shades--we don't want her peeking in on us."

"Oh, you're right. What did I do with the--there!"

The sounds of the shutters humming down into place barely sank into her conscious thoughts. Knowing the whole thing wouldn't have to last for long, she loaded up on the heavy paints, giving only half a thought as to how she was going to get the muck out of her pores before they went caroling later.

But her plan was doomed to failure if Nick continued to blunder around like a schoolboy waiting to be caught in the middle of a prank by the headmaster. "So, what did you tell her?"

"I embellished our argument last night--told her we'd really had it out." He returned

to her side and got his finger smacked away when he tried to smooth out her eyeliner. "Owl Then I said you came by this morning, after our shifts were over. We started a dual apology, things got away from us, and . . . it was over before we knew it had happened."

Natalie frowned at the white faced horror apparition in the mirror. "Uck!"

"Your face or my story?"

"Both." Abandoning the makeup, she dug the contact lens case out from beneath a pile of tubes and flipped it open. "This stuff is heavy. And . . . I sound cheap."

"Sorry."

"Yeah." Picking up the colored contact on the tip of her finger, she leaned toward the mirror and opened her eye, holding the lid up carefully. "And then?"

"So I called her a little while ago and said you were kind of upset with the situation. That maybe she could calm you down, because I kept saying or doing the wrong thing."

"So what else is new?" The contact adrift on her eyeball, Natalie blinked and reached blindly for a tissue, trying to stop the tearing. "Ow, it smarts."

"The real thing doesn't hurt."

"I'll stick to contacts, thanks." After a second's pause, she slipped the other contact into place, then picked up the false vampire teeth caps one of the lab techs had run up for her last night. Those fit easily over her teeth. Turning to Nick, she asked, "Ow's dat?"

He wrinkled his nose and shook his head. "Won't work for long."

"EEe on't eed *ong*. EEe eed yock yalue."

"Well, it's pretty shocking."

Rising to her feet, Natalie took the caps off her lower teeth. "How do you talk with these things on? I think I cut my lip."

"Let me see," asked Nick, with interest.

The contacts blurring her sight, Natalie pushed away in his general direction and actually managed to hit him. "Grow up. Now walk me over there, or there's going to be *real* blood on the floor. I can't see a damned thing."

Catching her hands, Nick led her to the living room, within sight of the elevator. Moving behind her, he helped her down to her knees. It was hard for her to get used to the contacts, but by the time he handed her the mallet and broken table leg, they were almost *too* clear.

She saw him wince as she hefted the mallet. "Too close for comfort?" she asked.

"Just be careful where you swing that thing," he warned her. Then Nick sat down on

the floor beside her and stretched out. There was a wet-looking red paint stain down his left side and arm. Taking her hand, he positioned the ready made--and pre-bloodied--stake between his arm and his side. "That'll look real enough." He paused. "Are you sure you want to go through with this?"

"*Now* he gets cold feet?"

Nick sat up on his elbows. "I'm serious. A startled vampire can be dangerous."

Natalie paused and hoped he couldn't hear the blood in her body suddenly drain from her heart and gather in the toes of her shoes. "Define 'dangerous.'"

Lying down again, Nick squeezed her shoulder with his free hand. "Nat, you know I'd never let her anywhere near you."

"That's comforting." Still, she looked over at the elevator door, wondering how fast Janette could move. "No, I'm okay. Besides, I'm armed. How about you?"

"Fine. I'm going to tell her it was your idea."

Natalie waved the mallet at him. "Coward."

"Did you practice your snarling?"

"After the day I've had, I didn't need to practice," promised Natalie. She looked up, hearing the sound of the elevator. "She's herrrrre!"

"Put your teeth in!"

"Oh, yeah." Natalie dropped the mallet onto the floor and placed the caps over her teeth. She positioned herself beside Nick and picked up the hammer, raising it, as if for a mortal blow, just as the elevator door opened.

Janette's heels clicked on the floor as she left the elevator. "Nicola, I don't know what in the world--" Then she froze. And screamed.

The noise was so loud and piercing, Natalie didn't have to pretend to be surprised. She looked up at Janette, opened her eyes wide, and snarled, just the way Nick taught her.

A shiver went through her as Janette's eyes turned golden-red instantly. Before Natalie could blink, Janette had launched herself across the room, nails outstretched and fangs bared.

But Nick was suddenly between her and Janette, his body a shield as Janette barreled into them, full tilt.

It was something like being hit by a train. Only it hurt worse. Natalie, at the bottom of the three bodies, groaned. "Will you guys get *off* me?"

She heard Nick saying, "It was a joke, Janette. Just a joke."

Her French wasn't good enough to pick up more than one out of every three words Janette hurled at Nick, but the ones Natalie did know she'd learned at truck stops.

First Janette's weight, then Nick's, lifted from her. Natalie cushioned her head with her hands and sighed, content to simply breath in peace.

There were a few more angry comments from Janette--it seemed Nick wasn't able to get a word in edgewise--then her heels clicked back to the elevator. Only the closing of the door cut off the invectives.

"Before you ask--I'm fine," said Natalie. Opening her eyes, she blinked. The force of the blow had popped one of the contacts right out of her eyes. "That was a stupid thing to do, wasn't it?"

"It was." Nick seated himself on the floor beside her, taking great care with his left side as he moved. "But I'd do it again in a heartbeat."

"About ten times a minute, then." Stifling the groans from her protesting muscles, Natalie managed to push herself to her knees. Then she realized that Nick was very quiet. She fished the other contact out of her eye, trying to get a better look at him. "Nick? How are you doing?"

"Bruised . . . uh, rib." His answer ended on an octave above the beginning. When she started to move toward him, he said, "No, I'm fine. It'll be another . . . minute before I can move, though."

"That's all right for you. But I'll be black and blue for *weeks*." Shaking her head, Natalie blinked until her vision cleared, then rose to her feet. She stumbled into the kitchen, making a mental note to go back and find the fang caps that had scattered around the room. "I'm damn lucky I didn't lose my real teeth." Turning, she smiled in Nick's direction. "What'd she call you?"

He licked his lips, sitting unnaturally still. "You know those riddles?"

"Yeah?"

"This was worse."

Natalie chuckled under her breath. "Gotcha!" she breathed, making a fist and drawing her elbow back in a victory gesture. "Mortals one, vampires one. Next one takes the game."

"We're not doing *that* again," called Nick, from the living room.

"Don't talk, you'll heal faster. I'll get you something to drink." Natalie scavenged through his cupboards and found two mugs. She poured water into hers, then opened the refrigerator.

There was the cow blood. And her thermos. And Janette's bottle of blood.

For a moment, she paused. Then she picked up the thermos and poured Nick's mug half full of the reddish stuff. Sniffing again at the mixture, she shrugged. Natalie dumped the water from her cup and poured the protein drink into her own mug, as well. It was only fair, after all--if she made him try it, she should try it, too.

Sniffing again at the contents of the thermos, she paused before closing the cap and returning it to the refrigerator. What was she thinking? This wasn't going to help

Nick. In fact, he'd probably use his injury as an excuse to get out of going caroling in another hour.

Natalie stared at the bottles of blood in the refrigerator and sighed. Maybe she *was* pushing Nick too hard when it came to backing off the blood. She had no idea what Nick really needed to survive--it could be that she was doing him more harm than good, trying to wean him off even the non-human diet.

"Nat?" he called.

"Coming." Without further thought, she lifted Janette's bottle from the refrigerator. The cork was loose enough to twist out with her fingers. Carefully using her own body to keep him from seeing what she was doing, Natalie poured some of the human blood into Nick's mug, then stirred it with a spoon. It disappeared quickly into the near-blood protein drink.

Satisfied, she popped both the bottle and the thermos back into the fridge. Then, placing a helpful smile on her face, she headed for the living room.

Nick had actually shifted since she'd left him and, when he saw her, he tried to get up. "Nat, I don't think caroling is a good--"

"Sit down," she ordered, alarmed at seeing him moving, and handed him a mug.

He winced as the smell hit him, then looked up with pleading eyes. "Nat, it's one thing to hit a vampire when he's down, but--"

"Drink!"

Her tone of voice left him no other options. Still making a face, Nick brought the mug up to his lips. Silently, she counted to ten as he took a hesitant sip . . . then a gulp. Then another gulp.

He nodded at her, as he lowered the mug. "Not half-bad. Still, the smell--"

"I'm working on it. Sheesh, give me a chance, will ya?" If he hadn't looked so pitiful, she would have thrown a pillow at him. As it was, she filed away a few mental notes on how to bait future protein drinks. Then she took a sip of hers.

Natalie spit out the stuff, then coughed. A shudder ran through her and she made a face, tasting the stuff again.

"It's not *that* bad," commented Nick. He took a healthy swig from his mug.

Natalie covered her mouth with her hand, feeling like she was going to vomit. Then, staring down at her mug, she realized she'd handed him the wrong mug. Nick had the pure protein drink.

She'd gotten the blood.

She almost couldn't get off the couch quickly enough. Heading for the sink, she grabbed a glass from the cupboard and ran water into it, downed a full glass, then part of a second. But she couldn't get the taste out of her mouth.

Nick was suddenly behind her. "Toothpaste helps," he said, gesturing toward the staircase.

"Thanks." Natalie turned and ran for the staircase, then stopped when she was halfway through his living room. "Wait a minute . . . how did you--?"

Nick touched his ear with the tips of his fingers. "You keep forgetting. Plus, I caught the scent as soon as you opened Janette's bottle. You've been foolscapped *again*."

The taste of the blood-mixture in her mouth paled when compared with her disappointment. "You mean, you really *don't* like the new drink?"

"Actually, it *wasn't* half bad." Then he shifted, testing his ribs by stretching out his left hand. "Why don't you go get that goop off your face? Schanke's singing should be enough to scare most of Toronto, without you looking half-dead."

Natalie touched her face, suddenly realizing that she was still covered with the thick make-up. "Oh, uck! You're right. Could you get my bag out of my car? I brought a change of clothes."

"Sure."

Her foot was on the first step when he called, "Natalie?" When she turned, he held up a two fingers. "Vampires *two*," he corrected.

Pretending to ignore him, she hurried up the steps, but paused at the top. Wait a minute--Nick liked the protein drink. And that in itself was small victory. "Mortals *two*," she whispered. "Next point decides the game."

And she knew that downstairs, Nick had heard her, loud and clear.

The End

(Editor's note: This is a story set in Marian's "Forever Nat" universe. 'Way back in ***Forever Net #1,*** *we published a very tender and touching story called 'Nectur du Natalie: the Forbidden Wine of Dreams.' In this story, and for some very good reasons, Natalie has been 'brought across' and Nick and Natalie have declared their feelings for each other. You do not need to have read that story to appreciate this one, however...)*

I'll be Home for Christmas

A *Forever Nat* Story

by Marian Huntsman Gibbons

Part 1

Natalie threw her hat and coat over the fat leather couch, shaking the snow off her hair. One blessing from becoming a vampire: she no longer felt miserably cold when the temperature dropped, and the snow flurries rushed in like weather terrorists.

It had been a quiet night at the Coroner's office; only one natural death to certify. She expected things to get busier, the closer they came to Christmas.

She looked around the flat; Nick wasn't home yet. There would be time to light the fire, get out their bottles of nourishment, change into something more comfortable . . .

But the message light on the answering machine was blinking insistently. She couldn't find the remote (Nick was always picking it up and putting it down in different spots) so she went to the device and touched the button.

"Natalie, darling, Happy Chanukah," came the quavery voice from the machine.

Oh, God, she thought. Great Aunt Rose.

"So we're expecting you over for dinner tomorrow night--and bring your young man, too. No presents. We're too old for that. But we want to see your smiling faces. Your mother tells me you're well, but you're not married yet. So why not? You're not getting any younger. Neither am I, but at least I know how to talk to an answering machine, not like some people, who don't even know how to use a phone. Call me sometime, eh? Let me remember what it's like to be a Great Aunt. It's not like I get a chance to be a great great aunt, with that shiksa blonde your brother married . . . God, what a waste that was . . . So anyway, we'll see you. Bye."

The rude beep of the tape cutoff brought her back from her ruminations. Great Aunt Rose must be ninety-five years old if she was a day. And looked as if she'd live to be a hundred and five, like her mother had, if a vagrant breeze didn't blow her away first. She'd been ancient as long as Natalie could remember, a little old lady with

brown-spotted skin, and that wavery voice going up and down with each word, each thought. All the years of Natalie's childhood she'd been a sucker for strategic tears after banged-up knees, too, and never failed to prescribe a cookie for comfort.

Natalie sighed. They'd always spent Chanukah with Aunt Rose, Christmas with Gramma and Grampa Lambert--Passover with Aunt Rose, Easter with Aunt Mary and Uncle Frank. At least, on Dominion day, the Lambert family got to stay home.

Shuttling back and forth between major religions had been easier as a child, except for the gefilte fish. Great Aunt Rose's gefilte fish had been the horror of Nat's life, all those extra holidays ago. She had spent days before each festive occasion wondering how could she bear to eat it; how could she dare not to, with all those relatives looking on and commenting . . . And Great Aunt Rose standing there, with her spoon upraised like a sauce-covered scepter, expecting her to consume, and enjoy.

And she wanted Nick to come to dinner too . . .

Oh, dear, she thought.

Natalie considered. How would her mother like a frantic pre-dawn phone call, begging her desperately for a suitable excuse to refuse a command performance (you couldn't ever say no to Aunt Rose)?

Sidney stepped up ingratiatingly and wound himself around her ankles, purring loudly in anticipation of his dinner.

Oh, well, Natalie thought. Her mother would like such a phone call just about as much as Sidney would appreciate having his food withheld.

"Do I need a new dress?" she asked Sidney, as she put down his food.

Sidney was too busy munching kibble to answer.

When Nick came in, she was watching the fire from the couch, busy trying not to bite her fingernails.

"Hi, Nat," he said, coming over to her, shedding his coat, jacket, gun and holster in a trail. He leaned over her and kissed her, icy still from the cold outside.

"Brrrr," she said. "Sit down and warm up."

He didn't sit down so much, as cuddle up next to her. His lips were chilly, as thrilling to her as they used to be, back when she was still mortal. Back then she had not dared to imagine Nick's soft kiss, for fear of what lay hidden behind his tender smile.

She had pretended she was a practical modern woman, had been 'just friends' with him. She had protected herself against the risks of all rational dangers, but who could predict that the sadness in his sea-blue eyes would unlock her heart? Who could have guessed that her dying wish to love him would be transmuted--by Janette's intervention--from a magnificent farewell gesture to the world, into an everyday experience?

Now the sharpness of his teeth pricked at her throat in a savage caress. Now his bite was foreplay, rich in erotic suggestion of delights to come that could never permanently damage her. Not anymore . . .

But his cold lips on her skin reminded her of that last, ecstatic rush of her blood into his mouth, as he devoured her light, her life, her essence in a give and take that bound them, forever, together.

She kissed his hair, smelling the lingering scents of smoke, the police station, Schanke's bold cologne, and the tang of dying Spruce. A Christmas tree.

"Nick!" she laughed, pushing him away. "Did you get us a tree?"

He nuzzled closer to her neck. "Yeah. It's in the car."

"With trimmings?" she asked, winding a tendril of his hair around her fingers.

Finally he looked up, his eyes brimming with mischief.

"Maybe," he said.

She slapped him playfully. "Come on, Nick. You said you'd get everything! You can't renege now!"

"I haven't," he insisted. "You . . . might not like what I got, but I got everything."

"Ooohh, Nick," she squealed, right into his ear, so he'd get the full force of it, "Let's put it up right now!"

He winced at her penetrating volume, and pulled back to look at her. "Nat, what's--"

But she didn't let him finish his question. She jumped up off the couch and dragged him excitedly to the elevator door, chattering determinedly at him about Christmas tree delights her family used to share, back when her father was still alive, back when Richard her brother had still been alive. Back when she had still been alive.

As they set up the tree, Natalie teased Nick unmercifully.

"Micky Mouse ornaments???!" she squeaked.

"That was all they had, Nat. Really!" claimed Nick, as they placed the strangely-shaped globes on the branches of the lit tree. Random lights of blue and red, green and white made the not-quite-animal faces seem to smile and nod.

"I dunno, Nick," said Natalie, looking askance at the tree when they were done. "Doesn't it seem kind of, well, blasphemous?"

"Look whose apartment it's in," was all Nick said.

"Um, oh, yeah," said Natalie, after a moment.

And then Nick's kisses in the tree-smelling flat made her forget everything else.

In the next afternoon, before Nick woke up, she called for a grocery delivery. She smiled happily to herself as she held the phone. Nick would be sleeping longer than usual. She'd made sure of that.

She gave Sidney a friendly scratch, as she waited for the ring through. "Tired the poor guy out, I did."

At Sidney's quizzical 'meow' she amended herself. "Lucky. Okay. Yeah, I suppose so--"

Then the grocer came on the line, asking who she was talking to. After she straightened out that confusion, she made her order.

An hour later, the delivery boy was huffy, as he passed her the bag.

"Hey, lady," he said, red-faced. "I got old and sick people I got to deliver to! Howcome you ain't gettin' your own groceries? You look perfectly healthy." And he looked her up and down.

Firmly, she clamped down on her teeth, and reined in her snarl. "I have a skin allergy!" she told him the truth, in words she bit off, rather than biting anything else . . .

And she berated herself, inside, when his belligerence turned to fear, and his skin went pale and clammy. Something about that smell . . . she licked her lips, even as she told herself to behave.

"Uh, um, okay, sure!" he faltered. "I'm sorry I mentioned it!" And he didn't wait for her to pass him his tip, but ran back to his car. He got his revenge, though. As he pulled open his door, its window and chrome reflected the radiance from the mild winter sun onto her face.

Hurriedly, she closed the front door, and stood behind it, breathing hard, and clawing the old scarred wood, rather than her seared eyeballs. She blinked back tears from the pain, and the shame, but her burned tissues merely soaked up the red moisture, and healed.

When she could see again, she carried the bag over to Nick's sham kitchen, and gathered virgin utensils.

A while later, Nick opened the bedroom door with a snap. "Natalie! Do you smell smoke?" he called.

"No, Nick," she said back. "Everything's fine." She flipped her spatula.

"What? But I--" he stopped speaking, and came along the landing, and down the stairs. He looked at her amazedly as she stood over a frying pan at his stove.

"Natalie," he asked patiently, "Why are you . . . cooking?"

"Um," she said. "I was going to tell you tonight."

He just raised an eyebrow at her.

"If you must know, I'm making potato latkes," she told him.

He sniffed. "Oh. Is that what that is?" and he looked at the dark brown masses in the frying pan.

"You know, you aren't in a position to criticize," she warned him.

He threw up his hands. "I'm not criticizing!" His short blond hair flew about his head as he vehemently denied her accusation. "I'm just . . . wondering . . . what this is all about. I mean, it's not as if we can eat it." Then he looked at her with something more than mischief in his deep blue eyes. "That is . . . can we?"

"Ah, no," she had to say. "These are for Great Aunt Rose."

"Uh hunh," he said, and although his face didn't fall, that certain light in his eyes dimmed down.

She felt like a heel, but he was still asking, "And who, pray tell, is Great Aunt Rose?"

She flipped her spatula again. "My mother's mother's sister. And we're going to her house tonight," she said almost breathlessly, almost defiantly.

"We are?" Nick asked, and his voice was almost silky.

"Um, yeah," Natalie replied. "We've been . . . invited to Chanukah dinner, and if I show up empty handed, I'll never hear the end of it. And my mother will never hear the end of it, either, so--that's why I'm cooking."

Nick ran his hand through his tousled hair. "Oh! Well, you could have just told me," he remonstrated.

She flipped again, not looking at him. "I know."

He slipped up behind her, playing with the bow tied on her apron. He put his mouth by her ear, and bit tenderly while he ran his hands down her arms. "So why didn't you?"

She shuddered under his touch. It felt so good . . .

"I, um," she floundered. "Well. It's dinner!"

"We'll show up after everyone's eaten."

"We can't."

His hands tightened on her upper arms. "We have to."

"Nick," she pleaded. "She's my family. She's just a little old lady. She's really old, and she hardly has any other pleasure in life. We'll just go, make nice, and leave her with a happy memory, okay?"

He looked down into her eyes for a long moment. "It means so much to you?"

She could only nod. "She's family."

Nick sighed. "Such a fleeting treasure. What time are we supposed to be there?"

She nudged him with her hip. "Not for a while."

His grin was immediate, and fierce.

Natalie carried the heavy covered dish as Nick knocked on the door.

Aunt Rose's house was old, but well-kept. It had been built in the 'twenties, new when she bought it with her husband, Leo. Great Uncle Leo had died a few years before Nat had been born, but Aunt Rose's stories of him had kept his memory alive in Natalie, even though she'd never met him. How he'd planted the rose bushes. How he'd nearly fallen off the roof when putting up the first TV antenna on their block. How he'd built the gazebo in the back yard with his own hands.

Nick's sharp rapping stopped abruptly in the middle of the third knock. He was peering suspiciously at a small box fastened to the doorpost, as if he were trying to read the Hebrew letters on it.

"Natalie, do you know what this is?" he demanded curtly.

"Yeah, Nick. It's a mezuzah," she said, shifting the dish in her grasp.

"Do you know what it's used for?" he demanded again, pointing at the box, with his finger at a safe distance from it.

"Um," she had to say. It was just there, part of the house, and always had been.

"It's a protection against--"

Natalie's mother opened the door at that instant.

"--evil," Nick finished lamely.

"Hi, Nick," said her mom. "Come on in. Nat, honey, don't tell me you tried to make latkes on your own?"

Nat shouldered past Nick, who was standing stock still on the doorstep.

"Come on, Nick!" she said as she passed him.

Nat's mother was talking. "Nobody but Sarah and Amy could make it--everybody else is too far out of town, but Aunt Rose is beside herself, having a child in the house. Did you think to bring any pennies?" Her mom was still holding the door open for Nick. "Come on in!" she told him. "It's cold outside!"

When he still didn't move, Mom took him by the arm and dragged him bodily into the house, shutting the door behind him. She took his coat and soft scarf, and had just turned around when a soprano shriek sliced into all their ears.

"Aunt Natalie! Aunt Natalie!"

Amy was racing at the top of her lungs through the clutter of chairs and tiny tables that filled the center of the living room. Miraculously she didn't upset a single one of them. She barrelled into Natalie, throwing her arms around Nat's hips in an exuberant hug.

Natalie only managed to save the heavy dish from flying into the air by a feat of vampire strength and dexterity. As her niece continued her single-minded hug, she kept her hold on the dish--but the cover rattled loudly, drawing a squawk from Sarah, who appeared at the door from the kitchen, and also came running through the furniture obstacle course.

"Amy!" she cried, reaching to try to save the endangered dish.

Nick came out of his paralysis, the final rescuer of the imperiled potato cakes. He lifted the dish entirely out of Nat's hands in a move too quick for human sight.

In a breath, all was quiet again, except for Mom's snorting laughter.

"Four stooges!" she said. All three adults gave her dirty looks. Amy was still hugging.

"Good to see you too, munch!" Natalie said, caressing her niece's bright blonde hair. "Hi, Sarah."

Sarah leaned into a cheek-to-cheek kiss. "Merry Christmas, Natalie--umm--"

"That's all right," came a quavery voice from the kitchen. "You I've got no hope for. Natalie, however . . . " Aunt Rose stood imperiously at her kitchen door, leaning a little bit on the cane she had to use even around the house these days.

"Aunt Rose," said Natalie, smiling because she couldn't do anything else. "Happy Chanukah." She disengaged from Amy, and crossed the small distance between her and the incredibly ancient, tiny woman.

Aunt Rose was frowning ostentatiously, but those dark blue eyes, so like her own, were bright.

Natalie gave her a careful kiss, smelling orange rinds, and cinnamon, and the rose perfume she'd always worn, for as long as Nat could remember. Her pure white hair, even as short as it was, peaked up around her head in thin tufts. There were specks of dandruff on the new navy-blue dress she wore.

"You're late!" Rose chided. "It's after dark!"

"I'm sorry. It couldn't be helped. Nick has this skin allergy . . . " Just as she had, these days . . .

"Hunh!" grunted Aunt Rose. She looked Nick up and down. He was carrying the latke dish, and smiling at her with that centuries-practiced charm.

Suddenly Rose staggered, and gasped, and held onto the door frame, steadying herself with her cane.

Natalie had heard her heart trip furiously, then settle down to slightly faster than its accustomed rhythm. She leaned forward to assist her in getting back her balance,

and heard the tiny woman whisper, "No! It can't be!"

Natalie bit her lip, and tried not to see the flash of horrified recognition crossing Nick's face.

"Um, Nick Knight, this is my Great Aunt Rose Shapiro," she said boldly, hoping this evening could still be salvaged, even though Nick's notorious past had probably screwed it up royally.

"Are you feeling all right?" Nick asked with real concern, although he hid his true worry under the facade of politeness.

"I--" Aunt Rose blinked at him, and raised a trembling hand to touch his face. "You look just like a young man I knew--oh, many years ago. When I was young . . . Before I was married. Younger than you!" she accused Natalie, taking a breath, and returning to normal.

"I know," Natalie responded in kind. "We modern career women, it's a disgrace!" she snatched the dish from Nick and edged by Aunt Rose, intending to put the pancakes in a safe place.

But Aunt Rose put out her hand to block her way.

"Natalie, I can see this. He's no Jew!" Aunt Rose accused again.

"Um, you're absolutely right!" Natalie said, letting the forward momentum of the dish carry her through the fragile roadblock of Aunt Rose's arm into the well-lighted, well-equipped kitchen.

"What are you, then?" demanded Aunt Rose of Nick, in a voice that said, 'I'm an old lady, and I won't be denied, even if I am rude.'

"Well, I was brought up Catholic," Nick answered, embarrassedly tugging at his collar. "But I haven't . . . practiced in a long time."

"Hunh!" said Aunt Rose, unsatisfied.

Natalie bit her lip again, and found one empty spot on a counter to put the dish. He hadn't practiced since before there were other denominations besides Roman and Orthodox! And eight-hundred years ago, the practice had been a bit different . . .

"Aunt Rose," Nat's mother's voice came from the living room. "Leave the young people be! What they are is their business!"

"They're in my house!" Aunt Rose refuted her, stamping her cane. "I'll make it my business if I want!"

"Aunt Rose," said Nick, taking the old woman's hand in his, and carrying it gently to his lips. "May I call you Aunt Rose? Thank you for inviting us to your Chanukah celebration."

"Ahh," said Rose, blinking back sudden tears. "You're as golden-tongued a devil as that other Nick I knew. Natalie," she called. "I don't care what he is. Keep him!"

"Working on it!" Natalie replied.

"Is dinner ready yet?" Amy asked, popping up behind Natalie and hopping to see what else was on the counter.

"Amy!" Sarah scolded from the living room.

"Oh, relax, Sarah," Nat's mother said. "It's just us, and we're family. Let the child be!"

Natalie started organizing the other dishes on the counter, making their noises cover up the conversation coming from the living room, but the bits she heard-- "--it's so hard, without Richard--" "--have to be father and mother both--" "--don't know what to do--" "--she gets so wild--" made her wish there were something more she could do than shove plates around.

The repercussions of her brother's brutal death were still being felt.

Rose and Nick were looking at each other in the doorway.

"Would you like to . . . sit down?" Nick asked hesitantly, finally breaking the spell.

Rose seemed to shake herself, then stamped her cane again. "No! You sit. We women have to get the food ready!" And she turned and came to stand by Natalie, supervising her dish shifting. She cautiously opened the lid of the offering Nat had brought, and sniffed. "Latkes?" she asked, as if she couldn't tell. "Are they kosher?"

Natalie tried not to stiffen. "As they could be with me making them," she said with assumed lightness. What she lived on now . . .

"You still cutting up dead bodies?" Rose asked. "That's not a good, clean occupation for a nice girl. Better to be a pediatrician, like your mother." She was lifting the lids on some of the other dishes, and sniffing loudly.

"I'm sorry, Aunt Rose, but we've had this conversation before," Natalie said with more force than she'd planned. "It's what I do. I'm good at it, and I make a difference in the world." She had to breathe. The plate she was in the process of moving connected with the counter in a chiming clang.

"All right, all right," said Rose, peering at her out of those dark blue eyes. "I know we've talked about this before! I'm not senile! I don't forget, like some people . . . " Rose blinked, and looked away from Nat, and breathed, too. "So put the dishes on the table already," she commanded, in an entirely different tone. "We've got a hungry child to feed!"

Natalie obeyed her directions.

Part 2

Soon they were gathered around Rose's huge old table. Amy had proudly told them, "I set it!" and they'd dutifully admired the seven-year old's artistic placement of Rose's heavily ornamented silverware--forks on the right, knives at the bottom, and spoons jauntily upright in the water glasses.

There was a moment of quiet. "Don't we say grace now?" Amy inquired.

"Um, after dinner's over," Natalie clued her niece in.

"Cool!" said Amy, reaching for the latke spatula. Sarah and Mom also started serving themselves.

Nick looked helplessly at Natalie, who shrugged, and took as little as possible of everything.

The dinner passed in a haze of conversation; Amy burbled, Sarah commented, Natalie's mom pronounced, Aunt Rose held forth, Nick conversed, and Natalie watched everyone through a haze of sweet pain. Every instant engraved itself on her perfect memory; she knew she would always remember exactly what each one said, how Aunt Rose's hands trembled as she drank her wine, how her mother's laugh sounded, Sarah's perpetual worried frown, Amy's antics, and Nick's quiet presence next to her.

There was one bad moment. Rose's sharp eyes noticed the food not disappearing from their plates. "What? It's not good enough for you?" she asked.

Natalie's mom came to their rescue. "Aunt Rose, he's got food allergies," she said. She knew their secret . . .

"So? He can't eat?" she responded. "He looks healthy to me!" and she chuckled to herself.

"Trust me. I'm a doctor," Mom joked.

Nick put a spoonful of creamed spinach in his mouth. "It's delicious!" he lied.

But Natalie could see the muscles in his throat work as he swallowed. She felt her own throat closing over the bit of roll she forced down.

And her mother's sympathy was hard to swallow, too.

When much of the food was gone, Amy abruptly sat back in her high-backed chair. "Whew! I'm done. That was good!" she said, throwing her napkin down on the floor.

"Amy," Sarah warned.

Amy scowled, but picked up the napkin.

Mom put her own napkin down. "I'm done, too."

Aunt Rose smiled calculatingly at her. "Natasha, maybe you can say the grace, now."

Mom looked hard at the old woman. "Aunt Rose, don't be a tyrant. You know I won't. I made that choice a long time ago."

"Thirty years!" cried Aunt Rose. "A bitter choice." The impossibly deep lines in her face became suddenly deeper. "But he's dead now. Robert is dead, and it's time to come home."

In the strained hush that followed her outburst, Amy asked, "Who's she talking about?"

Natalie's mother turned to the child. "My husband, Robert Lambert. He was your grampa, Amy."

"Mr. Knights of Columbus himself," Rose said sarcastically.

"Well, um, can I help carry dishes?" Nick interjected, puncturing the moment with deliberate awkwardness, scraping his heavy chair back over the hardwood floor, beginning to stand, and picking up his plate.

"What, are you a Knight, too?" Rose asked him.

As Nick straightened up, his posture shifted subtly, and he stood, compact, coiled in a stance that could bear up under the heaviest armor, holding the plate in his palm in unconscious courtly elegance, born of countless childhood hours as a page in a noble household. He nodded at Rose. "I have been," he said.

"And do you always come to the rescue of damsels in distress?" Mom asked him, her eyes shining with a film of tears.

"When it's in my power," he agreed. "Aunt Rose, you say the grace," he told her, with all the weight of centuries of male authority behind his order.

Rose grudgingly muttered a few words in Hebrew.

"What'd you say?" Amy asked.

As Rose explained, Natalie and Sarah and Mom and Nick cleared the table.

As they loaded dishes into the sink, Natalie whispered to her mother, "Boy, she's all worked up this year. What's her problem?"

"The same as it's ever been," Mom sighed. "Thirty years, and she's never forgiven me."

"Isn't that an awful long time to carry a grudge?" Sarah asked in a quiet voice.

"Not in biblical terms," Mom said, with a quirk of her lips. "And it's not really a grudge," she told Sarah, standing by her daughter-in-law and fingering the cross depending from the delicate chain around Sarah's neck. "Just a fatal disappointment." She looked up at Natalie, blinking back her own sudden tears. "But your dad wouldn't have had it any other way."

Natalie went to her mother for a quick hug. "Oh, Mom, I miss him too." And it didn't matter which him she meant--her father, or Richard, or the never known Uncle Leo. She missed them all.

From the living room came a crash as an occasional table toppled.

"Oh, Amy! I swear!" Sarah exclaimed, and rushed from the kitchen.

Nick, his hands immersed in dish water, asked Natalie with a lift of his golden

eyebrows, "So, this is what family is all about?"

She hit his arm, raising his mischievous smile.

"Amy! Stop it right now!" Sarah yelled.

Mom's eyes widened, she shrugged, and also hurried back to the living room.

"Actually," Natalie said, cleaning up some spilled food. "This is a good year." She looked at Nick apologetically. "It's a smaller group . . . "

He leaned over and kissed her hair. "You should have seen *my* family at holidays."

"Oh, yeah?"

He pressed his cheek into her hair. "Yeah. Wrestling and jousting and a few broken heads . . . "

"I wish I had," she said against his mouth.

Aunt Rose cleared her throat from the doorway. "It's nice to see a young couple so happy together," she said. "So when *are* you getting married?"

Natalie's lips left Nick's skin reluctantly. "We've been talking about June," she said.

Aunt Rose's smile faded a degree. "That's a long time from now," she said wistfully. She sat down heavily onto a sturdy kitchen chair. "Every Sabbath I survive, like King David, I give thanks."

"Every day of life is a gift," Nick agreed.

She shook a bony finger at Nick. "You'll see, if you live as long as me--what are you two laughing at? Honestly, young people these days!" But she looked hard at Nick again. "You look so like this fellow that I knew . . . "

Natalie saw Nick's wince, but her curiosity was engaged. She sat down next to the woman who had once been young, and known Nick. "When and where?" she asked.

Rose's eyes unfocused dreamily. "Oh, it was in New York, right after the war. The Great War," she amended, looking at Natalie. "So many wars," she sighed. "And they all have their own names."

Nick shook his head, and held his body very still, even as his hands continued rinsing dishes, up and down.

"I was a nurse. I volunteered for the Red Cross . . . well, I was young, what's in a name, it was still a 'mitzvah'--an obligation," she explained to Nick. "I went to France. I nursed the boys . . . " her voice caught. She sniffed, and stamped her cane upon the floor. "It was a very bad war. You can't imagine, now, how many died. So many fine young men . . . " Her voice trailed off, lost in the sadness of the past.

"And?" Natalie prompted her.

"Oh." Rose shook herself a little. "I met a girl, another volunteer nurse. She was very

like you, Natalie," Rose said, with a sharper look. "Brave, and outspoken, and dedicated."

Natalie ducked her head.

"Don't think I don't notice," said Rose. "I do. She became my friend, and even after the War, when she went back to her rich Society relatives, she stayed my friend. And this was in the days when it wasn't 'done'--to be friends with a Jew. It was another world then," Rose remembered. "Her father used to ask her--with me in the room, even!-- How's your friend, the Jewess?'"

"No, really?" Natalie demanded. She had always loved Aunt Rose's stories, and the sound of her quavery voice echoed back down the years.

"Absolutely!" Rose said. "And, except for me, she ran with the wildest group of flappers you ever set eyes on! But who did her father complain about? Me!" Rose stopped, and took a breath. "But we used to go out dancing, doing the wild Tango, the Foxtrot, the Charleston; we knew how to dance in those days. And this girl, her name was . . . was . . . " Rose stopped again, lost.

"Vivian," Nick whispered, in a voice only Natalie could hear.

"It's been so long since I thought of her," Rose apologized. "Well anyway, she had this boyfriend-- young, good-looking, rich artist; he was quite a Bohemian, very dashing, and he'd come dancing with us. I always thought he had the saddest eyes . . . but it was years ago."

Nick put the last of the clean dishes into the rack. He turned around, looking at Rose with those sad eyes. "Lifetimes ago," he agreed. "Were you a good dancer?" he asked, with a smile that touched, but did not lighten, his eyes.

"Well, I knew my left foot from my right," Rose admitted, her sensibly shod foot tapping to the rhythm of a ghostly big band.

They fell silent.

"So?" Natalie demanded. "What's the end of the story?"

"Ah," said Rose. "I wasn't going to tell you. It was sad."

Nick's face froze under its fixed smile.

"She died," Rose said distantly. "She was murdered, and there was this enormous scandal, oh, huge! And life went on, I met your Uncle Leo, we got married, and moved to Toronto."

Natalie knew she was staring at Nick; she knew that expression of guilt he wore behind his eyes. She had to know. "You?" she asked, soundlessly.

Nick's eyes slashed down, away from her gaze, as he shook his head infinitesimally. "LaCroix," he murmured silently, his lips barely moving. But then he looked up at her, his blue eyes blazing. "Because of me! As always."

Natalie closed her own eyes, remembering the ecstatic rush of her blood leaving her

body at Nick's kiss; she could imagine how that girl had felt; she could guess what it had been like for her, loving Nick, leaving life at LaCroix's cruel touch. She shuddered.

Her great aunt's dry, bony fingers found her hand, and squeezed. "There! See, I told you I shouldn't tell the ending. Sad endings don't belong on a happy night."

Natalie looked into Rose's shining old eyes. "Every story has its own end. You can't put a happy face on a sad story--"

"Any more than you can put new wine into old skins. I know," said Rose. "To every time . . . well, it's time to light the candles," she said, getting up from the chair with a creaky jerk, and a thump of her cane.

Nick rushed to put his hand under her elbow, but she ignored his attempt to help. "I've been standing up by myself for ninety-five years. I know how to do it," she snapped.

Nick stepped back, his face expressionless.

Rose thumped her way out of the kitchen, but Natalie saw the way Nick's mouth tightened, and his eyes half-closed in memory.

"She was a terrific dancer," he whispered, "graceful as a gazelle. She came through the war, through her service in it, intact, not like others . . . "

Natalie could guess which 'other' he meant. Vivian . . . "I wonder how she did it," she said, when the silence stretched too long.

"I guess she always had her . . . faith. Her own personal covenant." Nick smiled down at Nat. "It's very hard to argue with."

Natalie could have done it, for forms sake, but Nick's lips were too inviting.

"Come on!" called Aunt Rose. "We're going to light the candles!"

They broke apart, half-laughing. "Shall we?" Nick asked, waving her ahead of him. She'd only gone a step when he swatted her behind.

"What was that for?" she demanded.

He just wrinkled his nose at her. "Because I felt like it."

"Hunh," she said. "Just wait till I catch you under some mistletoe . . . "

In the little table-cluttered living room Mom was setting the Chanukah menorah on the table nearest the window. The nine-branched candelabrum wobbled a bit before she righted it, and pushed the six candles back into position.

"What are we doing?" Amy asked.

"We light the candles as a memorial," Mom answered.

"To Daddy?" the little girl asked, her blue eyes big, and sad.

"Not entirely, Amy, though it's always good to remember those who have gone before us." For a moment, Mom looked at Natalie, her own eyes sad. "We light the candles as a memorial for a miracle that happened a long time ago, and for the miracle that happens every year when winter starts."

"That it gets cold?" she asked indignantly.

Natalie answered. "No, munch. You know how the days get shorter and shorter, and then they get longer again?"

"Yeah. In summer, I have to go to bed while it's still light out!" Amy reached for a candle, to start playing with it. Sarah's hand grabbed her fingers first. Amy glared.

"Well, we celebrate that, too," Natalie finished.

"Cool," said Amy. "Can I light the candles?"

"Of course, of course," Rose beamed. "But you must start with the one in front, the Shamash, and then use it to light the rest of them from the left."

"How come there's only . . . " Amy counted. " . . . five candles?"

"Tonight's the fifth night of the festival. We light one more each night," Rose explained.

"Oh, man," Amy complained. "We should have come on the last night!" she told her mother, her head tilted upward in angry disappointment.

"Tonight was when we were invited, Amy," Sarah said, holding her temper.

The little girl pouted dramatically. "I want to light them all!" she said.

Nick knelt in front of her, catching her eye to eye. "It's an honor to light these candles, munchkin," he said, borrowing Nat's nickname for the child. "If you can't do it gladly, it's best not to do it at all."

Amy dropped her eyes, and her head. "I'm sorry," she said contritely. Then she looked pleadingly at Aunt Rose. "Can I still light them?"

"Sure," Rose said. "Anybody got a match?"

The adults smiled at this, and Amy controlled her scowl.

While Mom was fumbling in her purse for a book of emergency matches, Aunt Rose coughed experimentally. "I hope I can get through the whole prayer," she said wistfully, batting her eyes at Nick. "You don't by any chance speak Hebrew, do you?"

He tugged at his collar. "Well, actually," he began to admit.

"Natasha!" Rose called. "Get Leo's hat from the front dresser!"

Natalie's mother held the matches she had found at last, and hurried for the piece

of furniture next to the front door.

As Mom went back and forth, Natalie's head turned from Rose to Nick. She put her hand to her cheek. "Another language?" she asked, teasing Nick.

"Well, um," Nick said.

Mom came up, bearing an old black yarmulke. She caressed the fine felt. "I haven't seen this for years," she murmured. She handed it to Nick, who put it on gingerly.

"Um," Sarah started hesitantly. "Should he wear the . . . shawl thing too?"

"Good girl! You're paying attention!" Rose smiled at her. "But no. To cover his head is respect--to wear the Tallit is a yoke. If he wants to convert--" Rose nodded coyly at Nick, whose head moved backward on his neck at the suggestion. "Well, it's an idea," Rose remarked.

"Can I light the candles now?" demanded Amy.

"Okay, here," Natalie's mom said, handing her the matches. "Start with the Shamash," she said, pointing to the detachable candle.

"Oh, now where did I put that?" Rose was asking herself, looking around her for something; then she found a small black book all printed in Hebrew. She handed it to Nick, who took it, blinking.

"Are you sure you can do this?" Natalie whispered, too low for mortal hearing.

"Yeah. Um. I think so," said Nick. "I'm . . . I mean, I was Catholic. This shouldn't be a problem."

Natalie bit her lip. Bad enough he bought Mickey Mouse ornaments . . . If he burst into flames as Amy lit the candles . . . She glanced around the room for a fire extinguisher, just in case.

Amy was striking the match. The light flared from the Shamash's wick.

Nick's voice, mellow and strong, filled the room with familiar foreign syllables. "Barukh . . . vetzivanu lehadlik ner shel Hanukah . . . " He went on speaking as the candles began to burn.

Amy's eyes shone with the light from the candles as she finished, and Nick finished speaking.

"What'd you say?" she demanded.

Nick handed the little book back to Rose, with a lift of his eyebrows.

She read solemnly, "He said, 'Blessed are You, Lord God, Who has commanded us to kindle the light of Chanukah. Blessed are You Who has performed miracles for our fathers in ancient days, at this season. We kindle these lights on account of the miracles, the rescuing deeds, the wars You carried out for our fathers through the hands of Your holy priests. And throughout all of these eight Chanukah days these lights are holy and we are not permitted to make use of them, only to look at them,

in order to give praise to Your Name for Your miracles, for Your rescuing deeds, and for Your marvelous acts."

"Oh," said Amy. "I like miracles. They're cool."

"Then let me tell you about some," Natalie's mother said, drawing her grandchild by the hand to the couch. "We can watch the lights, and tell our stories. And then we could play some cards, and spin the dreidel, while the candles burn."

Sarah trailed after them.

Rose looked at Nick speculatively. "You speak Hebrew beautifully, you know," she said. "But how come you speak it with a Spanish accent?"

"Um," said Nick. "Because that's the way I learned it?" He tugged at his collar again.

"Hunh," said Rose. "Now that sounds like a miracle I'd like to hear."

"Me, too," Natalie whispered.

Rose found her chair by the couch, and settled in.

Natalie lifted her eyebrow at Nick, who whispered, "I knew a Marrana in Madrid--it was 1495, just after the Spanish forcibly evicted all the Jews who wouldn't convert. She and her family pretended . . . but they were found out. I tried to save her brother from the Inquisition . . . " His face went sad again.

"But you saved *her*, right?" Natalie broke his introspection.

He turned his head then. "Yeah. At least I did that . . . "

She punched his ribs. "Will you cool it with the negative waves?"

He smiled, and kissed her forehead. "Okay."

Part 3

On the couch, Mom was speaking. "And this was in the days when Antiochus was king of Syria, a little over two thousand years ago, after Alexander the Great had come and gone--"

"I remember Alexander. He was the guy with the cool horse, right?" Amy piped up.

"Um, yeah, among other things," Mom said. "So the Jews had come back from Babylon, and were living in the promised land--what we call Israel today--but the Egyptians wanted to be in charge of their territory, when the Syrians already were in power. And there were battles back and forth, but nothing had been settled. So Antiochus had this idea that he should consolidate all his territories, because he was in charge of a lot of different places, and they all had their own languages, and religions, and customs."

"Like Canada?" Amy asked. "Did places want to secede?"

"Um, yeah," said Mom. "But this guy thought the way to handle it was to make everybody believe the same things, so he issued orders that all the local churches should start having people worship him--"

"Whoa--major egomaniac, hunh?" Amy said.

Mom nodded. "Where do you learn these things?"

"I watch cartoons!" Amy said, and squirmed. "So then what happened? I bet people didn't like that."

"Well, a lot of places went along with it; he made the alternative pretty bad, you know, and most people would rather get along than be punished for saying they believe in something that, after all, is pretty hard to prove."

Rose glared at this. "Four thousand years of history is not something that's 'pretty hard to prove!' she snorted. "That's how far back our history goes, Amy. Never forget!"

"Cool," said Amy. "But this Anti-whatsis guy. Did he kill people?" Amy asked, as innocently bloodthirsty as only a child can be.

"Yeah. But the Jews were stubborn--"

"As always," Rose muttered.

"And they didn't want to go along with the new program. They had a covenant with God, and nobody else. And they did die, rather than give up their religion."

"How many?"

Mom closed her eyes. "I don't know. It was a long time ago. However many it was, it was too many. And one of the really bad things was, that the guy who was being the High Priest of the Jews then--"

"His name was Menelaos," Nick inserted. "I've heard this story, too."

"He was the guy in charge of the religion--"

"Like the Pope?"

"Yeah. So he was supposed to be on the right side, but he collaborated with Antiochus, and tried to make the Jews do all this stuff that was against their principles, and against the religious laws that they followed."

"Such as?" Amy prompted.

"Well," Nick answered for Mom. "Playing sports naked, sacrificing pigs on the sacred altars. Worshiping statues of Antiochus, and other Greek gods," Nick added.

Amy looked at him wide-eyed. He nodded, reinforcing his sincerity.

Natalie next to Nick, whispered, "How do you know all this?"

"LaCroix told me once," he whispered back. "He was all regretful about it, too--called it a 'failed experiment.' I never did figure out what he meant."

Mom went on. "So anyway, there were Jews who really didn't like what was going on, and they started fighting back, putting up an armed resistance--"

"The Maccabees," Sarah added unexpectedly. "I know about them, too," she said. "I took that chapter for a Bible study once," she said, then she subsided.

"So these boys fought back to earn the right to worship as they pleased--"

"As they were commanded to by God," Rose corrected her.

"And, eventually, they won."

"That's how come we remember it, right?" said Amy. "I mean, if they'd lost, we wouldn't have heard about it."

"So young to be so cynical!" Rose complained. "But, essentially, yes."

"So where's the miracles?" Amy insisted.

"I'm coming to that," Mom said, hugging Amy. "Well, they had won, and they got possession back of the Temple--this was the second temple, not the first one that Solomon built--they cleaned it up, and set it to rights, and lit the sacred oil lamps, that were supposed to burn all the time. And the story goes, that they only had enough oil for the lights to burn for one night, but they burned for eight nights anyway, which is why we celebrate for eight nights."

"Is that all?" Amy said. "They got some energy efficient candles and called it a miracle?" She squirmed off the couch and stalked over to the bright menorah. She touched her fingertips to the flames. "That's an awful dinky miracle."

"Amy," Nick's voice caught her, and held her still. "The lights were just the outward sign. The miracle was that people believed in something strongly enough to fight for it; to fight, and die, and persevere until they won. That's the miracle."

"That's a crummy miracle," Amy shrugged, and put one knuckle to her eye.

Natalie went to her niece, and took the small, shaking body into her arms.

"People are stupid to believe things," Amy said, her voice ragged.

"No, munch, that's not so," Natalie tried to comfort the little girl.

"Yes it is!" the child insisted. "They believe things like people die, and then they come back." She looked accusingly at her mother. "But they don't come back!"

Nick was suddenly at Natalie's side. She could feel his presence, cold and solid, next to her.

"Amy, you know what I've told you," Sarah said to her daughter, across the gulf from couch to table. "It's what we believe. It's God's plan."

"Then why'd my Daddy die?" Amy wailed, looking accusingly at all the adults, their faces lit by the golden candlelight. In the silence lit by light, she cried, "Why did God want Daddy in heaven? Doesn't He have all those other people? How come He had to take MY Daddy?"

"Amy Lambert, you stop that this instant!" commanded Rose, her voice low, but very clear. "Everybody dies. Everybody," she repeated, holding the girl's gaze.

Natalie felt the child go still in her arms, and she felt, too, the weight of Nick's hand, resting on her shoulder.

"Every man's deeds are written in the book of memory, known to God, Who knows everything: 'Who is to live, and who is to die, who by water and who by fire, who by the sword and who by hunger . . . '"

Nick's hand tightened on her shoulder.

"No man escapes his fate," she said, then quirked her mouth, "nor woman, either. But your Daddy was a virtuous man, and--though the times we live in say otherwise--a life of virtue *is* its own reward. Life, and family, and keeping your promises--to people, and to God, is what counts. Crying 'Why, why, why?' doesn't accomplish a thing. There are too many sorrows in the world for that," she said, and suddenly coughed. "Everybody dies," she repeated. "What matters is how you live--" and she began to cough again.

Natalie heard the ragged rhythm in the old woman's heart a moment later. She looked up at Nick, alarmed. He was frowning; he'd heard it too. In her arms Amy was sniffling, but she stood up straight.

"Sarah," Natalie said urgently to her sister-in-law. "Call 911. We need an ambulance."

Sarah sat stunned for a second. Mom was already bending over Aunt Rose, holding her wrist for a pulse. Sarah stood up, and blundered for the kitchen, and the rotary phone on the wall there.

"What's wrong?" Amy asked in a small voice.

Natalie handed off the child to Nick. "I think Aunt Rose is having a heart attack," she said quietly. "Mom, is your bag in the car?"

Her mother was nodding. Natalie tore out the front door, into the cold night air, feeling freezing gusts pass over her, and through her, as she battled with her Mom's Honda's door. She heard the metal break, and thought briefly that she'd have to pay for repairs (she'd forgotten to get the key) but the bag, the heavy, instrument-laden bag, was in her arms. And then she was back inside the house.

Mom had made Aunt Rose lie back against the couch. Rose's face had gone ashen, and her short eyelashes fluttered against the parchment skin as she breathed, short panting breaths punctuated by the coughing that she could not stop.

Mom's stethoscope was in her ears, and she moved the instrument carefully across the old woman's chest. Natalie didn't need any amplification to hear the lub-dub, silence, trill, lub-dub. She grabbed for Nick's hand. It was warmer than her own,

now.

Sarah stood at the doorway to the kitchen. "The ambulance is on its way," she said, watching the scene anxiously.

"Ah," the old woman's whisper filled her house. "They're too late."

"Don't say that, Aunt Rose," begged Mom. "They'll be here any second. Hang on!"

Rose's eyes opened a fraction, and blue fire gleamed within them for an instant. "Why?" she asked. "So they can fill me full of tubes and drugs? No thank you very much," she said, and breathed shallowly. "I can feel God's hand on me now." And she smiled. "Yehee Shem Adonai mevorakh me-attah ve-ad olam."

Natalie's mind translated the Hebrew for her; it was the same verse she had explained to Amy earlier, the grace. "May God's Name be blessed from now on and throughout all time and space." The old woman's voice went on, ungrudging this time, until she fell silent again. In the quiet, they could hear the siren of the ambulance from far away.

"Natasha," said Rose, putting out her hand. "Come home."

Natalie's mother held Rose's hand gently against her face, and kissed it, while sparkling tears fell down her cheeks. "I'm already home, Rose. I already said the words. 'Whither thou goest, I shall go, and thy people shall be my people, forever and ever.' I said that to Robert. And a promise is a promise."

"Stupid, stubborn . . . " she coughed again. "Natalie!" she called feebly.

Natalie took her other hand. "I'm here, Aunt Rose."

"What are you, now?"

Natalie opened her mouth, and closed it. She could not answer this question. She could not say, "I am a vampire."

The old woman's grip tightened on her hand. "What?"

"Uh--" was all she could get out.

"Natalie Lambert, remember this! Your mother was a Jew--and her mother, who was my sister. That makes you--"

"A lapsed Catholic, like my father . . . " Natalie insisted.

"Then you're a nothing!" Rose told her fiercely. "Don't be a nothing! His light is so bright . . . " she said, sighing. "Amy!"

Nick brought Amy close; he still held her in his arms.

"Blessings on you, child. Never forget!" Rose's voice quavered.

"Aunt Rose! Aunt Rose!" the child wailed.

The siren came closer.

Rose's panting stopped. She took a deep breath, and opened her mouth. "Sh'ma Yisrael: Adonai Elohenu Adonai Ehad! Barukh Shem Kevod Malkhuto le-olam va-ed!" whispered the old woman, then began again. "Sh'ma Yisrael: Adonai Elohenu Adonai Ehad!" And her breath rattled in her throat, and her eyes closed forever. Natalie heard the old heart go still.

She heard her mother's tears, splashing across the limp hand she still held against her face. She heard Sarah go to the door, and open it for the ambulance techs. She heard Nick's voice, almost incomprehensible, telling them that death had already occurred--yes, the deceased was attended by physicians, and the certificate would so state--yes, they were just doing their jobs, but they could go now.

She heard the door close behind them.

"Go, for God has sent you!" her mom was saying, her voice broken.

"Mom," said Natalie, letting go of the empty hand she held, and reaching for the living hand of her mother. "Mom."

Her mother's fingers clutched at her hand tightly. "Oh," she said, swiping at her eyes with the back of her other hand. "There's so much to do." She started to stand up, but Natalie had to help her. "We have to call the Hevrah Kadishah, so they can come and sit with her, and we have to cover the mirrors, and sweep the house . . . "

"Mom," Natalie said, holding her still.

"And say the last blessing," her mom looked up, half-wildly, looking at Natalie, and Nick, with Amy, and the wan worried face of Sarah, still standing by the kitchen door. "This is what you say," she said to Sarah, motioning her to come over. "Barukh Dayan ha-Emet," she told them, pronouncing the words clearly. "And then you make a tear in your clothes," she instructed.

Amy nodded, solemnly.

"Barukh Dayan ha-Emet," they all said together.

"What did she say?" Amy asked.

"Blessed are You, the True Judge," Nick answered her.

"No," said Amy. "Aunt Rose. At the end. What did she say?"

Natasha turned to her granddaughter. "She said, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One! Blessed be His glorious Kingdom for ever and ever! Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One!"

"Sh'ma?" said Amy. "Means 'hear?'"

Natalie's mother nodded.

"I want to know the rest of it," Amy said.

Nick let the little girl down, and she came to Natasha for a hug.

Natalie arranged the body carefully on the couch. She dealt with death on a daily basis, and yet . . . Her breath caught somewhere in her chest, and she found herself looking for Nick.

Nick was staring at the window, wonder in his eyes.

"Look, Nat," he said.

She saw where his gaze pointed. The five candles and the Shamash in the menorah had all burned down to nothing, to less than nothing. All the wax had been used up, and none had spilled over, a good omen, but there was still a glow above the candelabrum. As she watched it, it flared up bright-- so bright she thought her eyes must be burned by it, so bright she thought her mind must be burned by it. But there was no pain, or shame such as she had felt from the reflection of the sunlight off the grocery deliverer's car. There was only a sense of peace, and rightness, and a love so pure and unending that she forgot entirely the sadness that had weighed her heart.

"Oh! Did you see that?" said Amy, running to the table where the menorah, dark now, stood.

"I did," breathed Natalie's mother.

"A miracle!" said Amy. "Our very own miracle," she said, satisfied. "Tell me again, Grandma, what she said. Sh'ma Yisrael . . . Tell me again."

"After the funeral," Natasha said. "Then you can say the blessings again."

"Then you'll tell me?" Amy demanded. "I want to know them all."

"Then I'll tell you," agreed Natasha Lambert.

In the kitchen doorway, Sarah Lambert cried, fingering the necklace that she wore.

"It didn't hurt, Nat," Nick whispered. "It was so bright. But it didn't hurt."

She squeezed his hand, then looked around the crowded cluttered living room. There it was. She stepped to where the candle in its holder sat, found the matches Amy had used to light the Shamash, and lit the solitary candle, placing it by Aunt Rose's head, on the end table by her couch.

"In Proverbs, it says, 'The soul of man is a light of God,'" she told him. "A Rose by any other name . . . " she said, smiling wryly. She brushed down the tufted white hair around the quiet, wrinkled face. "She's gone home for Christmas," she said to Nick, her mouth trembling, as she held in the red tears that marked her.

Drinker of blood, she thought, on the verge of weeping. It had always bothered her, of course, but not this way. Unclean, she thought, outcast, the words of Deuteronomy echoing through her perfect memory:

> "But make sure that you do not partake of the blood,
> for the blood is the life,

and you must not consume the life with the flesh.
You must not partake of it;
you must pour it out on the ground like water,
you must not partake of it,
in order that it may go well with you
and with your descendants to come,
for you will be doing what is right in His eyes."

Nick enfolded her in a tight, tight hug; at least he could never break her. And she would never let him go. They were bound together, by the blood, forever, or as long as it would take to find a way to bring them both back across.

After a moment, she pushed him away. "Mom was right. There is a lot to do."

She spoke to Sarah. "Come and help me get things ready," she said. At the kitchen door she looked back at Nick, looking down at the quiet body.

"You were a wonderful dancer," he said to Rose. "I'll never forget you."

And she knew, whether she lived a mortal lifetime, eight centuries, or four millennia, she never would, either.

The End

A word in conclusion:

This story was written in response to Susan Garrett's Christmas challenge, and although I did not meet her deadline to post, (and I'm late for Chanukah as well, which finished on the 17th) I still present it with great pride and affection. (And not a little jealousy. 5 stories 'off the top of her head.' This story has taken me the whole time since she gave the challenge, a lot of head scratching and work, and a bunch of research.)

But I'm very grateful for her having made that challenge, because I learned a great many very interesting things, some of which I hope I've conveyed accurately and interestingly in the story above. For any errors which remain, please accept my apologies.

Let me say clearly that I do not in actuality find any evidence in the show to hint that Natalie is the product of a Jewish/Catholic mixed marriage. That Richard and Sarah were Christian was shown in "I Will Repay"--but the 'what if' factor was enough to get me going in this piece of fanfic. And when I wrote "Natalie Lambert, Vampire Coroner" and invented the character of Natalie's mom, it just seemed to me to be too interesting a concept to let go.

I did my research from the following fascinating books

"The Complete Book of Jewish Observance" by Leo Trepp
"Festival Days, A History of Jewish Celebrations" by Chaim Rapahel
"Jewish Holiday Party Book" by Lillian S. Abramson & Lillian T. Leiderman

The High Priest of the Jews in 168 BCE WAS named Menelaos. (Talk about serendipity . . . As Karin said, "Sounds like our boy.") And he was a lot worse than I mentioned . . .

At any rate, I hope you have enjoyed the story. If you must know, I cried while I wrote it–a lot. My mother died from a heart attack similar to Rose's, only I wasn't there at the time. And my Dad died the next year, a couple weeks before Christmas. Seven years ago, now, but I still remember. This story is a memorial to them, too. They raised me Catholic, and were just as sad as Aunt Rose when I didn't follow in their footsteps. But we all make our own choices, and hope they will bring us to our goals.

There is a favorite toast Jews use, and I will appropriate it here, although we have no wine, nor can we touch glasses. But in that spirit, I say to all of you: "L'Chaim!" "To Life!"

Marian Gibbons
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'Tis the Seasoning

by Susan M. Garrett

Schanke pushed open the door to the coroner's lab, knocking on it as he passed through. "Knock, knock. Sorry, kids. Am I interrupting anything?"

Nick, sitting on a counter and reading something from the desk looked up and simply shook his head. "Nothing that would interest you, Schank." Natalie stood beside him, wearing her lab clothes. She quickly hustled away a sheaf of papers. They didn't look all that interesting--probably yet another of Nick's wonder cases. He was beginning to suspect the secret of Knight's success.

"You know," he said thoughtfully, pointing a finger at Nick, "I think I've finally figured out your secret, partner."

Nick glanced quickly at Natalie, whose eyes were very wide. "Thought so!" cried Schanke in triumph. "Behind every hot-shot detective is an A-1 coroner. Fess up, Doc, you've been cracking the boy wonder's latest cases."

"You're mixing your metaphors again, Schanke," warned Natalie, flashing him a smile. She walked over to a filing cabinet and opened a drawer. "The Boy Wonder works with Batman."

"Hey, I'm not that far off," countered Schanke quickly. "They got a new name for him now, right? The . . . uh . . . Dark Knight. Yeah, that's it." Gesturing toward his partner, he added, "And don't go telling me he's not the type to put on a pair of tights to save the world."

Nick slipped off the counter. His feet on the floor, he smoothed out the front of his jacket. "So that's where your check goes every month--you need your comic book fix."

"Naw, I just read Jenny's when she's through with them. They got real investment potential. And speaking of my darling daughter--" He reached into his coat pocket and withdrew a very crumpled red piece of paper, which he presented proudly to Nick. "Check it out--second billing, under shepherds."

His partner took the paper hesitantly, his eyes following as Schanke pointed at his daughter's name and role. "Sheep Detective?" asked Nick.

Even Natalie turned from the files. Schanke nodded proudly, tucking his thumbs in his lapels. "Yep. It was Jenny's idea. They let her wear a trenchcoat and a holster. After all, somebody has to check out missing sheep, known wolves in the area, take statements, that kind of thing. It was one heck of a play this year."

"Sorry I missed it," said Nick, patting his partner on the shoulder. "But aren't you here to pick me up? I think Stonetree's gonna be pretty ticked if we wander in late for three straight shifts."

Schanke shrugged. "It's not like we've got anything major going on. And I'm here to pick up the results on that jumper from last Monday."

"That's what I'm looking for," said Natalie. A second later, she pulled a file folder from the drawer and handed it to him. "Final's yet to be typed--we've been kind of busy this week. I'd say the soonest you're going to get the paper is the day after Christmas." Shoving the program from Jenny's Christmas Pageant into his pocket, Schanke took the file folder from her and opened it. "By the way," he said, as he let his eyes wander over the pertinent information, "Myra says she wants you there at seven. She knows Nick's only got an hour for dinner break, so we're having buffet style."

"Wait a minute, I never said--"

"He'll be there," promised Natalie, as Schanke looked up from the folder. She gave him a wink. "I'll make sure of it."

He matched her smile, trying not to meet Nick's eyes because he knew he'd find an argument there. "Damn! And I had a bet with Myra that you'd cancel out this year, just like last year. It figures, the way my week's been going." Closing the folder, he handed it back to Natalie. "Take your time on the final. Looks like a suicide to me."

Nick glanced at Natalie, then took the folder from her. "We've got no witnesses, just a body in an alley, and you come up with a suicide?"

"You call it, *Dr.* Lambert," said Schanke, crossing his arms. "Say Nick here jumps off a forty foot ledge--does he land feet first or head first?"

Natalie smiled, meeting Nick's gaze. "I'd say he probably doesn't *jump* at all. And as for landing . . ."

"There's a point to this, right?" pressed Nick.

"Ninety percent of the time, jumpers *jump*." Schanke hopped forward, then pointed toward the ground with his hand. "Feet first. Somebody who falls or gets pushed usually goes head first."

"You've still got ten percent to work with," warned Natalie.

Schanke made a clicking sound with his tongue and, making his hand into a gun, 'shot' her. "That's why we've got *you*, Nat--you even out the percentages. But I'll lay you even money he's a jumper." It surprised him that Nick paid such close attention when he spouted off--he'd figure anybody with a win/loss ratio like Nick's knew this stuff cold. But there was a lot of stuff about Nick that surprised him.

"And . . . we gotta make a stop on the way," he warned Nick, as his partner headed for the door.

Closing his eyes, Nick groaned and pretended to stumble into the wall. "Schanke, not *another* fruit cake run?"

"Wait," called Natalie, returning the folder to the filing cabinet, "I haven't heard this one. Get back here, now."

"You explain it." Nick waved his hand at Schanke, his forehead leaning against the wall. "I can't deal with it anymore."

"Can I help it Myra's sister got sick?" Sighing, Schanke shook his head sadly, then turned toward Natalie. "See, Myra's sister makes *the* all time greatest fruitcake in the world. But she's been sick this year. And she won't give Myra her recipe. So I've been looking for a fruitcake that comes as close to--"

Natalie had seated herself on the edge of her desk. Holding up her hand, she stared at him, a horrified expression on her face. "You're not telling me you *eat* those things?"

"Of *course* I eat them," declared Schanke defensively. He pointed toward Nick, who was still leaning against the wall. "What *is* it with you people? Fruitcake is an art form. And Christmas is *not* Christmas without the right fruitcake."

"Please, Nat, talk some sense into him," said Nick, turning to face her. "I tried to explain to him--how there's only really one fruitcake and it just gets passed from person to person because nobody really eats them."

"That's a lie, promoted by the anti-fruit cake lobby."

"It's a *legend,*" corrected Natalie. She narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "You eat the whole thing? Even the little green pieces?"

"*Especially* the little green pieces."

She shuddered and turned away. "Nick's right--you're certifiable."

"Oh, you haven't heard the best part yet," said Nick. He straightened and pointed dramatically at Schanke. "He's made me stop in every food store, mini-mart, bakery, and gourmet shop we pass. And he's been *sampling* fruit cakes."

"I've gotta find the right one," explained Schanke, for what seemed to him like the hundredth time. Giving up, he threw his hands in the air. "Let's move, partner. There's a store on eighth--"

Nick dropped to his knees before Natalie. "Please, call me a cab. Rent me a car. *Anything.*"

Stunned, she stared down at him. "Where's your Caddy?"

"In the shop." Schanke smirked, as Nick rose to his feet and dusted himself off. "Somebody got a teeny scratch on his bumper because he got a little too close to a concrete divider."

"We got an arson-in-progress call," said Nick, casting a glare at Schanke. "*While* we were at a mini-mart on a fruit cake run."

"They should control the traffic flow in those lots a little better," said Schanke. Waving over his shoulder at his partner, he called, "Next stop, Lynn's Haven of

Pies--"

He wasn't immediately certain whether the sound he heard was Nick whimpering, or Natalie choking back laughter.

* * *

There were at least fifteen people in his living room that he didn't know. Adding that to the twenty-odd he did know and the number of assorted children running around the house--he was forced to stop in mid-stride as a nerf arrow crossed his path, followed quickly by a four foot ninja wearing Batman sneakers--Schanke was pretty sure they'd just about reached capacity.

Then the doorbell rang . . . again. "I'll get it," he called, hoping that Myra would hear him above the chatter, the Christmas music playing on the stereo, and the death cries of warring children. But he made it through the holiday greenery and to the front door without incident.

Nick and Natalie stood on the porch, Natalie in mid-sentence. "--You are *too* going to eat--" She stopped when she realized the door was open. "Merry Christmas, Schanke."

"Same to you." He leaned forward as she gave him a peck on the cheek, then stood to one side, letting her enter. "Ah, the famous chicken marsala," he noted, catching sight of the aluminum foil covered dish in her hands. "Kitchen's in the back, like always. Throw your coats on the bed. Just watch out for the ninjas."

"Ninjas?" asked Nick, pausing on the threshold and peering into the house.

"Yeah. I think they're playing ninjas against Batman. Last I saw, Batman was winning." Clapping his partner on the shoulder, he asked, "You gonna come in or what? Myra can't collect until you actually set foot in the house. So if you want, I'll make you up a plate and you can stand there--"

"I'll come in," Nick decided quickly. When Schanke reached for his leather jacket, he shook his head. "Sorry, I can't stay that long. I picked up Nat on the way over, so if you could drop her home--"

"No problem. Too bad you're the heroic type who doesn't mind working on the holidays so us poor family slobs can spend time with the wife and kids." Leaning closer to Nick, he added, "I'm working next year. *Count* on it. Between Myra's relatives and the Batman brigade, I'm ready for a quiet murder-suicide, with some vice detail work on the half-shell."

"We'll see what we can work out," promised Nick.

"Can I get you a little holiday cheer?" He rubbed his hands together and headed for the living room.

"No thanks, I'm on duty. But I *would* like to see the hostess."

"She's in the kitchen. And if you're willing to take your life in your hands by going in

there--?" When Nick shrugged, he led the way down the hall. "Jenny's around here somewhere. I think it's her turn to be Batman--so keep an eye out for a cape."

He paused at the entrance to the kitchen and peeked his head around the door. "Honey, Nick's here--"

And all he saw was fruitcake. Mounds and mounds of glistening, golden fruitcakes. Oh, yeah, some were off-white, pale and sickly, some too brown and there was one colored a very violent shade of pink . . . but most of them were shimmering yellow, sparkling with a promised sugar high he never expected to find in this lifetime.

Schanke stepped forward, dazed and awestruck. Closing his eyes, he sniffed and a thousand different aromas wafted from the kitchen table--cinnamon and candied cherries, pineapple and macadamia nuts, rum and spiced wine . . . all melded with that wonderful, fresh dough smell of a seasoned, well-prepared fruitcake.

"Surprised?" asked Nick, from behind him.

He spun around and found Nick and Natalie grinning at him like kids. "You did this, for *me*?"

"Well, it was either that or commit you," said Nick. When Natalie punched him in the shoulder, he added, "Or me. You see, Schanke, not everybody feels the way you do about fruitcake. So I asked around. And this is what turned up."

"He's been making non-stop phone calls for the past two days," explained Natalie. "Then we called Myra and told her what was up--

"You and that big trunk of yours!" declared Schanke.

Nick nodded, the slightest tinge of unhappiness on his face. "That 'sticky' big trunk of mine. And there's more in the back seat. Maybe you can lasso the ninjas to help us carry it all inside?"

"Oh, they don't listen to me. You'd have to get Myra for that." Half-turning, lured by the smell of so many riches, Schanke was almost dumbstruck. "Nick, Nat--I don't know what to say--"

"How about 'Merry Christmas'?" said Natalie, walking past him, toward the back kitchen door. "And a promise to get Nick's car cleaned?"

"Oh, yeah. Sure. Anything." Running up to Nick, Schanke grabbed his hand and shook it. "Merry Christmas, partner."

"Yeah. Merry Christmas." Shaking his head in amazement, Nick followed Natalie out the back door.

Schanke wanted to follow. He tried--but the fruitcakes lured him back to the table. Taking a deep breath, he inhaled all of those wonderful fragrances again . . . and a thought struck him. He really *was* blessed that so many people in the station would be willing to give up *their* fruitcakes to make Christmas special for *him*. He owed them. He'd get the list of names and addresses from Nick, as soon as possible. This year, they'd get thank you notes. And next year . . .

Nick and Nat's names would be at the top of the biggest, bestest fruit cake gift list in the world.

The End

Mary writes:

Well, nobody ELSE was tackling it, and it just HAD to be done, so I decided to take a crack at it! Yeah, you're thinking you can probably write the plot right now . . . maybe, maybe not? You MAY be surprised! Here goes:

It's a Wonderful Knight

by Mary J. Farrell

Nick was not in a good mood. Even Schanke, who was usually oblivious to changes in his partner's mercurial nature unless they were actually directed at him, was steering clear of him today.

"What's his problem?" Schanke complained to Captain Stonetree, in Stonetree's office. "It's Christmas Eve, for heaven's sake! Season of cheer, good will to all and all that stuff!"

"Cut him some slack, Schanke," Stonetree rumbled, looking past his open door to where Nick sat scowling at some paperwork. "He's got no family here, maybe he's lonely!"

"With the friends he has? Me? Nat? What about that hot little number that runs that club . . . uh . . . Janet?"

Janette, Nick mentally corrected him, eavesdropping on the conversation. He knew he was in a foul mood, but couldn't pin down why. Centuries of Christmases had come and gone. He usually got depressed at this time of the year, but this was different. He looked up at the clock. He was off in a few minutes, and sunrise wouldn't be for half an hour. He got up, grabbed his jacket and headed out the door, trying to ignore the comment Schanke was making about "Scrooge".

* * *

The Raven was decorated for Christmas to reflect Janette's own bizarre outlook on the season. There were chains strung across the ceiling and around the doors with little stainless steel Christmas trees dangling from them. There were large bunches of mistletoe everywhere and there was even a small tree, silver-colored, with crystal ornaments and red lights, blood red lights. Nick scowled at this as he walked past and his expression didn't improve when he set eyes on Janette. She was wearing her customary black but with candy-cane earrings and a red-and-white stripped silk scarf thrown across her shoulders.

"Nicholah!" She made as if to kiss him, but caught his expression. "What is wrong?"

"Who're you supposed to be, one of the elves' nightmares?"

"*You* are certainly in a mood today!" She paused and regarded him, "I know the season is depressing, *cherie*," she said sympathetically. " Come . . . have a drink!"

"No thanks. I just came . . . I don't know really *why* I came." He turned and started to leave.

"Nicholah! We are having a small gathering here later tonight. Please join us?" Nick mumbled a "Maybe" and left.

* * *

He'd been home for an hour or so, and had sunk into a further depression, as evidenced by the three empty bottles set out in front of him on the table, when he heard the door buzzer. He turned on the monitor. Natalie was standing outside, slapping her mittens together to keep warm. "Nick?" she called, "you up?"

He buzzed her in without comment, and guiltily hid the bottles in the garbage. He'd found two of the three corks and was looking under his couch for the third when he heard the door. Natalie came in, the frosting of snow on her hair and coat looking like icing sugar.

"Merry Christmas! Or should I say Bah Humbug?"

"You've been talking to Schanke," Nick said accusingly.

"No . . . I've been listening. It's not a dialogue with Schanke, it's a monologue!" Seeing her attempt at humor had failed, she crossed the room and joined him on the couch. "What's the matter, Nick?" She went to touch his arm, but he pulled away. "Is it Christmas?"

"I . . . don't know, Nat. It's like . . . I don't make a difference."

"C'mon, Nick. We've had this conversation before. You can't catch *all* the bad guys." She took his chin in her hand and turned him to face her. "You *do* make a difference, Nick."

"Yeah, a negative one! How many times have I put you in danger? You'd be better off if you'd never met me!" Natalie sighed, and stood up.

"*Ouch*! What's that?" She bent down and retrieved the missing cork. "Drowning your sorrows?" she said, trying to keep the disappointment out of her voice.

"Just giving them a good dunking," he said tonelessly, refusing to meet her eyes.

* * *

An hour later, Natalie left, leaving Nick in the same mood she'd found him. She'd hesitated giving him the Christmas gift she'd gotten for him, and at the last minute, she'd put it quietly on the counter on her way out. Nick didn't appear to notice. He turned on the television as the door closed. An old movie had come on. Yes, he remember this, it was that Jimmy Stewart Christmas flick that was all over the airwaves at this time of year. He leaned back on the couch and started

watching, but a few minutes into it, his eyes became heavy and he turned it off and decided to go to bed.

Nick woke up from a deep sleep and looked at the clock. He'd been out for several hours. He sat up and put his head in his hands.

"Feeling any better?"

Nick jumped out of bed at the familiar voice and looked wildly around the room. He focused on the doorway. His eyes widened and he whispered one word.

"Martin?"

* * *

The year was 1943, and Europe was too dangerous for mortals, much less vampires. Nick was on his way to London, to meet up with LaCroix and Janette. For once, he agreed with LaCroix, it *would* be better if they stayed together. They would have more of a chance of getting through this nightmare unscathed. No matter how many times Nicholas witnessed the ravages of war, he could not harden himself to it, even when he had been mortal and had been the one doing the fighting. He waited in the train car impatiently. Another in a series of long delays was preventing the train from leaving the station. Nick looked at his watch. If they didn't leave soon, he'd miss the connecting train that would take him to London.

He looked up as the compartment door opened, and a young minister stepped inside. Oh, *outstanding*! Nick thought. The young man settled in and cleared his throat. Nick, who had been avoiding eye contact, relented and looked over. "Hello," said the minister, "I'm the Reverend Mr. Martin O'Rielly."

Surprisingly enough, the rest of the delay and the three-hour train trip that followed seemed to fly by. The Rev. Mr. Martin O'Rielly, "call me Martin," turned out to be an intelligent, earnest young man, who was eager to talk and could converse on a number of topics. Nick found himself drawn to the young man's charisma and charm. No . . . charm wasn't it . . . he seemed to radiate an inner light of some sort. Nick's mouth twisted wryly as he considered what LaCroix would say if Nick told him he spent half the day talking to a holy man.

They parted reluctantly at the London station, Nick to go into the city, Martin to catch another train to the coast. He was going overseas to be a chaplain to the soldiers at the front. Martin gave him a simple blessing, to which Nick tried not to wince, and told him he thought they would definitely meet again. It was only a couple of months later that Nick heard that Martin had been killed in shelling in Germany.

* * *

Nick rubbed his eyes with his hands, but the man was still there, just as he remembered him, with even more of a glow around him. Nick kicked the covers away and stood up. "I'm dreaming!"

The figure smiled a familiar smile and leaned against the doorway. "Think so? C'mon, Nicholas, I told you we'd meet again."

Nick still couldn't believe his eyes. "You'd better not tell me you're the ghost of Christmas past!"

Martin laughed, and the sound struck a memory in Nick. "No . . . sorry, that's someone else's job tonight. I decided to drop by to have another of our chats."

Nick stared at Martin, "You're about fifty years late, aren't you? What happened?" Then a thought struck him and he almost physically stepped back. "Martin! You're not . . ."

"No, I'm not a vampire, Nick." As proof, he indicated the cross around his neck. "I'm *dead* dead, I assure you. I've come to show you something. Remember that movie you were watching tonight?"

Nick thought for a minute, "Yeah, the Jimmy Stewart one. Where he gets to see . . . Oh, come *on*!" He looked back at the bed, half expecting to see himself still sleeping. "I *must* be dreaming!"

Martin laughed again, "No, Nicholas, you're *not*! You told that charming Dr. Lambert tonight that you wish she'd never met you. Do you want to see what would have happened if *none* of the people in your life now ever met you?"

Nick considered it for a minute. "They'd have been better off!" he said despondently.

"Maybe, maybe not!" Martin extended his hand. "Ready?" Nick had been wearing sweatpants and a t-shirt, and he slipped his feet into sneakers. He walked over to Martin. As he came closer, the light caught the shiny surface of the cross that Martin wore. Nick held up his hands, expecting it to hurt his eyes, but it didn't. Martin merely smiled at him and took his hand.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Suddenly, he was at the Raven, but it was a different Raven. There were none of the decorations that he's seen earlier, and the club was laid out differently, but there was something about it that he *knew* it was the Raven!

"This is . . . it's different!"

"It *is* the Raven, Nick. But *this* Raven is in New York; Janette never went to Toronto. Here she is now!" He indicated a small gathering of people around a table in the corner. Nick approached, and the only familiar face among them was Janette, but she too seemed different. Her face was hard, and her eyes were like ice. She stood up and lifted her glass.

"Companions of the Night! I give you a toast this Christmas Eve to 'friends'" she practically sneered this word, "gone but not forgotten. I'm free of you at last, LaCroix!" This last sentence was practically shrieked, and the other vampires at the table cheered as she downed the contents of her glass.

"What . . . happened? She's so . . ."

"Hard? Cold? Remember Nick, she never met you. There was no one to keep the tiny flicker of warmth and hope alive in her during the hard times." Martin

regarded her sadly. "She has become the child of her master."

"LaCroix," Nick breathed. "Where is he? What does she mean, she's free of him?" He looked wildly around the room, somehow expecting LaCroix to jump out of the shadows and laugh in Janette's face."

Martin shook his head, seeming to read Nick's thoughts. "He's dead, Nick. But in this reality, it was another's hand that finished him." He indicated Janette, who seemed to be in the process of drinking herself into a stupor. "He taught her too well. She became a mirror of him. Cold, cruel, heartless. Finally, the pupil turned on the master. Six months ago, she ambushed him outside Munich and staked him to the ground."

Nick recoiled at the image. Janette, beautiful Janette, who, underneath the invincible shield she wrapped around herself, was a vulnerable little girl, had become this . . . creature!

Martin tried to draw Nick away, but he resisted, staring at the cold, dead eyes of the woman before him.

"Leave her, Nick, the Janette you knew died a long time ago in her." He grasped Nick's arm and pulled him away. "Our next stop is a house in Winnipeg."

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

They were now standing in an unfamiliar living room. A small, dark-haired woman was half-heartedly decorating a Christmas tree. Her back was to them, but Nick recognized her immediately.

"Myra?" She turned to get more garland, and Nick gasped at the change. She looked ten years older. Her hair was shot with grey and there were wrinkles around her eyes. She called out to someone in the next room, "C'mon honey, help Mommy decorate the tree?"

A small figure appeared around the door. "Did you mail my letter to Santa, Mommy?" Jenny asked.

"Baby, come here." Jenny obeyed, and Myra drew her onto her lap. "Honey, there are some things that even Santa can't do--" she began.

But Jenny twisted out of her arms and screamed, "No, there isn't, Santa can do anything! He's magic! He can bring Daddy back!" She ran crying from the room. Myra put her head in her hands and started to cry.

"I won't believe Schanke *left* them!"

"Not in the way you mean, Nick. Remember that lunatic academy dropout that you stopped from shooting Schanke?"

Nick turned haunted eyes on Martin. "You mean . . ."

"You weren't there to stop him, Nick. Don died in the line of duty almost a year ago! Myra moved here shortly after."

Nick looked down at her, still sobbing, and reached out to comfort her. "I'm sorry, Myra, I didn't know!" His hand passed through her shoulder effortlessly. She had no reaction. Nick turned to Martin. "Can we get out of here?"

"Sure, Nick, but I'm pretty sure you're not going to like where we're going." Martin laid his hand on Nick's shoulder and they disappeared.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Nick found himself in a hospital room next to a bed in which lay a figure hooked up to what seemed to be a million tubes, wires and IVs. The bed's curtain obscured the head of the patient, and Nick could only see the hands, but . . . he knew those hands. He'd watched them work with the delicacy of a top surgeon a dozen times. He stepped around the curtain and his breath caught in his throat.

"Natalie!" he gasped. He turned and searched frantically for Martin, grabbing him by the shoulders and nearly shaking him. "What happened to her?"

"She was lonely in her life, Nick. Even more so than she is in your reality. She decided to go to a dating service . . ."

"Roger!" Nick turned back to her as Martin continued.

"She fought back and he struck her in the head repeatedly. There was quite a bit of brain damage. She won't get any better than this--" Martin stopped as Natalie opened her eyes. Nick leaned over the bed and looked into them, and what he saw caused his heart to break. She wasn't there any more, it wasn't Natalie. The woman in the bed looked through him with a glassy stare.

He wrenched himself away from the bed and covered his hands with his eyes. "No!" he said, his voice rising to a scream, "No! No! NO!"

Martin pulled his hands down from his face. They were back in his apartment. "Now do you see Nick? Do you see what a difference you've made in these people's lives? How can you say they would be better off not knowing you?" Martin let go of Nick's arms and took a step back. "I've got to go now." When Nick protested, Martin held up his hand and smiled. "I don't belong here, Nick. You *do*! I did what I was put on this earth for!" He smiled again, and, using his cross, he sketched the same blessing in the air he had given him fifty years ago: "Merry Christmas, Nick!" In an instant, he was gone.

Nick quickly walked downstairs. The first thing his eyes fell on was a silver-wrapped package on the counter. Natalie! He rushed to the telephone.

* * *

Fifteen minutes later, he buzzed her in. He opened the door and she looked at him apprehensively. "I'm sorry," he said, "I'm so sorry! I've been acting like a fool lately! Forgive me?"

Natalie was taken aback with the change in his attitude. "Forgive . . ? Uh . . . of course, Nick!"

He pulled her into the living room. "I wouldn't blame you if you didn't," he said, as he sat her on the couch and walked behind her, "I've been a real pain lately. I don't know why you put up with me." He came back and presented her with a box. "Merry Christmas, Natalie. I demand you open it now!" She was still a little surprised, but the tone of his voice caused her to grin.

She took the box and opened it carefully. "Oh *Nick*!" she breathed, "it's *gor*geous!" She held up the delicate gold chain with the amethyst pendant on it. "It looks like it's an antique!"

"Well, I guess it is," Nick said wryly, "It was my mother's." Natalie started to protest at such a gift but Nick sat down beside her. "It's considered *rude* to refuse a gift in any century! You deserve that and much more for putting up with me lately." He didn't tell her that he'd just decided to give it to her and wrapped it a few seconds before she came. She put it on and sat admiring it, then looked at the other present on the counter.

"Now you have to open your gift!" He returned her smile, and walked over and picked up the box. "It's part of your . . . uh . . . recovery program," she said. "Maybe someday you'll be able to wear it." Nick looked puzzled as he opened the box. He lifted the lid of the case and froze.

"Uh . . . Nick? Are you okay? I'm sorry, I'm an idiot! I should have warned you!"

"No, no! It's okay!" He stayed her hand as she stood up and went to take the box away from him. "Natalie where on earth did you *get* this?"

"At this little shop downtown. Funny . . . I've never been in it before, but I was walking by it, and something told me to go in . . . do you . . . is it okay?"

Nicked looked at her and smiled and Natalie breathed deeply with relief. "Maybe someday I *can* wear it." He walked over to her and gave her a big hug. "Merry Christmas, Natalie." She was surprised for a minute, but she soon returned it.

The box Natalie had given him was on the coffee table, and, in it, the beautiful cross caught the light, the cross that was the exact duplicate of the one Martin had worn earlier that night.

The End

Well, there it is, my take on "It's A Wonderful Life". I hope everyone on FKFIC-L has a VERY Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year, and I look forward to a wonderful year of excellent fanfic ahead of us!

Cousin Mary, Ravenette

And what would the season be without at least one carol?

O Mighty Town of Toronto
by Edith Crowe

(to the tune of "O Little Town of Bethlehem")

O mighty town of Toronto
How still we see thee lie
Above thy troubled, restless sleep
A hungry shape glides by.

For in thy dark streets shining
Gold eyes, white fangs bring fright--
Your dreads and fears are true, my dears
LaCroix is back tonight!

Have the happy holiday of your choice,
Edith

And the same from all the editors and authors of ***Forever Net!***

--Valery & Karin
Susan
Jennise
Margaret
Sharon
Marian
& Mary!

About the Writers . . .

Edith Crowe (ecrowe@sjsuvm1.bitnet)

prefers to remain a lady of mystery. I met her at a party once; nice lady, and makes terrific bat cookies.

Mary J. Farrell (MFARRELL@admin.cabot.nf.ca)

when not rattling along the Internet lines via her Server From Hell, writes poetry and prose both FK-related and not. She vows she doesn't watch *too* much *Forever Knight*, but she admits to having a cat named Bonnie Wee Corbie (an alias for the affilation known as Ravens/Ravenettes). She is an avid reader and couch potato who sincerely believes that reality is for those who can't handle science fiction.

Susan M. Garrett (susang2522@aol.com).

Let's face it, Susan's fascination with literary vampires has become a lifelong pursuit, but it does have limits ("I'd rather *see* than *be* one"). She's the Assistant Director of MIS for the Township of Dover, alumnus of the University of Dallas, active participant in fannish consumer advocacy, a writer and editor, and a founding member of the Cult of the Black Aura. Susan generally plays well with others, her penmanship shouldn't be spoken of in polite society, and she's currently being treated for her addiction to being photographed with Disney characters and Universal monsters.

Marian Huntsman Gibbons (starbase5640@genie.geis.com)

is a member of SFWA (by the skin of her teeth) and a fanatic *Forever Knight* writer, with 15 complete telescripts (including a *Starman* crossover and a *Star Trek: The Next Generation* crossover). Her ambition is to become a staff writer for the next dozen seasons of *Forever Knight*. She's had many jobs in her life, but the same husband for the last eighteen years, the same dog for the last eight years, and the same house for the last five years, in Santa Rosa, California. Email and letters are always welcome.

Jennise Hall (jennise@netcom.com)

is a formerly sane person (sometime during her early childhood she thinks) who met her co-author Margaret on forkni-l. She soon discovered that Margaret had an unwelcome effect on her ability to pass as normal. By day she's a software engineer and by night she's . . . well . . . insane.

Valery King (kingv@ccmail.orst.edu, kingv@ucs.orst.edu),

having achieved her ambitions of going to Disneyland, buying a pc, and getting a satellite dish, is very happy to have new episodes of *Forever Knight* because otherwise she'd have nothing left to live for. Besides indulging her passion for correcting other people's spelling and grammar, she sings with local choirs and acts in local theater groups, cares for a very old black-and-white cat and a very obnoxious young Siamese, and pays for everything by cataloging at the library at Oregon State University.

Margaret Newman (margaret@cs.arizona.edu)

lives in Tucson with a collection of pets including a Peke named Jamie LaCroix. She currently works at the University of Arizona (the one in Tucson), Computer Science Department. She likes to write in her spare time as well as cross stitch, watch *Forever Knight*, and terrorize her family, friends, and pets.

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is the Special Collections Catalog Librarian at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. An avid fan of *Forever Knight* and Geraint Wyn Davies, she's also interested in rock & blues, Sting, quilting, cats, Pekes, vampires . . .